Fall 2015

Success and the Other[Ed] Woman: Examining the Persistence of Female Students from Saudi Arabia

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SUCCESS AND THE OTHER[ED] WOMAN: EXAMINING THE PERSISTENCE OF FEMALE STUDENTS FROM SAUDI ARABIA

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In partial fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Dawn M. Winters

December 2015
SUCCESS AND THE OTHER[ED] WOMAN:
EXAMINING THE PERSISTENCE
OF FEMALE STUDENTS FROM SAUDI ARABIA

Date Recommended  9/30/15

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I dedicate this dissertation to my parents who showed me that love engenders and nurtures any human endeavor, assured me that the ceilings that do exist are indeed breakable, and never allowed me to believe anything was less than possible.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my partner, Sarah, who shows me every day that unconditional love is truly without conditions, that discovery and imagination are what makes our days meaningful, and that this was all worth it.

Finally, to the women who inspired and participated in this research: A long time ago, I learned that women from all over the world possess strength and wisdom that is often times negated, objectified, or reduced. You taught me, and now the world, that the stereotypes that precede you do not define you. Your stories should empower you and others to navigate this world with confidence, wisdom, and grace. Masha'allah!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No person is an island, and no significant endeavor is ever completed alone. I would not have been able to complete this task without the help of the following people for whom I am thankful.

I wish to express gratitude to Dr. Barbara Burch whose guidance and mentorship always showed me the interconnectivity of ideas, the magic of people, and the brilliance of a good story. Without her leadership, I would not be writing these words.

To my committee members, Dr. Kristin Wilson and Dr. Alex Poole, I owe distinct and meaningful thanks. Dr. Wilson, for opening my eyes to a world of research without bottom or top, reaffirming my belief in the power of story, and inspiring me with every office visit. Dr. Poole, for being my teacher, mentor, colleague, and, now, friend. I value your insight and wisdom, as well as your unmatched opinions on conference goers, the shapes of public figures, and the size of cookies at the coffee shop.

To the League of Extraordinary Administrators: Ryan Hall, Valarie Phelps, Wouter Van Alebeek, David Kerr, and Dewaker Dhandapani, as well as former LEAs, Kandace Hawley, Dima Badghaish, and Rachel Shouse. You have been my coworkers and friends. You have been my shoulders on which to cry, hands to high-five, legs on which to stand, and, always, ears that are always understanding. To Ryan Hall, for his mentorship and friendship that make me a better person. We are, as I once said, inextricable. To Valarie Phelps, for her diligence, servant leadership, and constant cheerleading that kept me sane. To Wouter Van Alebeek, for his unwavering friendship and ability to lead that teach me every day that patience and love are a part of a workplace. Besties for life. To David Kerr, for his sense of humor and ability to listen
that have shown me more than he will ever know. To Dewaker, for demonstrating that people are what matter in the world. To Kandace, who showed me the student can become the master—put the baby in the water, and the baby will swim. Dima, for being a part of this research before it even flourished into a tangible idea. You inspired this and nearly everything I do. To Rachel, for introducing peace, musical taste, and crafts into the workplace. To all of you, I could not have done this without you.

I would also like to thank the teachers, employees, and students of ESLi. You are, after all, the inspiration for this work. I never thought I would walk this path, but you have allowed me to see the intrinsic value of a life lived around the world in a single building.

I must also acknowledge the teachers I have had who have inspired a life in education. To those in the WKU English department when I was a student of literature—Elizabeth Oakes, Kelly Reames, John Hagaman, Elizabeth Weston, Lou-Ann Crouther, Niko Endres, David LeNoir, and Walker Rutledge—thank you for instilling in me the gifts that accompany the ability to read, think, and discuss. What you showed me enabled this work. To those I have had in the doctoral program—Ric Keaster, Helen Sterk, Tony Norman, and all the rest—thank you for teaching me that leadership can be taught, that power is malleable, and that growth and change are processes to be respected.

To my classmates and partners in crime from Cohort IX, thank you for making Saturday classes more bearable. To Joy Menser, especially, your support, understanding ear, and undying sense of humor are inspirational. I have made friends and colleagues for life.
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With the influx of international students on American campuses, it is imperative that universities seek solutions to unique challenges surrounding their retention. More specifically, because women from Saudi Arabia are accustomed to highly-structured gendered practices in their home country that diametrically oppose those in the United States, they represent a sub-group within a sub-group of the often-generalized international students. Relatively few studies have been conducted regarding the academic persistence of specific groups of international students.

The goal of this narrative analysis was to examine the salutogenic aspects of the persistence of Saudi women using Vincent Tinto’s (1997) revised model of student persistence. More specifically, this study explored the pre-entry characteristics of each participant, identified specific personal and institutional goals they set, sought to find how they academically and socially interacted and integrated, observed the extent to which they exerted mental effort and learning, and recognized how they persisted despite external commitments and individual challenges.

This study utilized a narrative analysis approach to gather data pertaining to the stated goals and research questions. Utilizing a snowball sampling technique, the researcher gathered a list of women from Saudi Arabia who were progressing toward or had earned a bachelor’s degree at a public university in the mid-south in the United States; the list of participants grew as the research unfolded. Eleven women agreed to
participate; each was interviewed using Seidman’s (2013) three-part interview structure in order to establish a focused narrative.

Overall, the women in this study were successfully persisting at American universities despite specific challenges. Their pre-entry attributes, including the noted support of family members, laid a foundation for success at the university. Additionally, strongly-stated goals connected to success, earning a degree, and building a career emerged as important amongst the participants. The participants academically and socially integrated; however, all experienced isolation on both fronts. The extent to which they exerted effort in academic pursuits became a clear part of success. Despite fierce commitment to various external commitments, the women were successfully persisting or had successfully persisted at an American university.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

American colleges and universities have been concerned with student retention, attrition, and persistence since the 1930s (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Researching, studying, and tracking what makes certain students succeed and certain students drop out or stop out has become a top priority for university administrators who are seeking new ways to serve an ever diverse student body. Researchers like Vincent Tinto (1993, 1997, 2005)—one of the first and leading researchers in retention—have examined the specific factors that mitigate a student’s chance of leaving college. Iterations and modified versions of Tinto’s model have been introduced; however, the original and Tinto-revised version have remained the cornerstone of student persistence studies (Tinto, 1997).

The majority of retention researchers have agreed on one primary tenant of retention: integration (Astin, 1977, 1985; Bean, 1980, 1983; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). Students must academically and socially integrate into the college environment, immersing themselves in its culture and, perhaps, leaving some of their own identities behind. Doing so proves difficult for many. The general term “many” specifically manifests itself in the harrowing numbers of those who drop out or stop out of universities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 57 percent of all first-time, full-time students who sought a bachelor’s degree at a four-year public institution earned their degrees within six years. When accounting for private and private for-profit institutions, the number jumps to 59 percent, bolstered by private institutions and stunted by for-profit institutions (National Center for Education
Statistics, 2014). Although these overall numbers give palpable evidence of a lack of integration, they provide no insight into why certain students succeed and others do not. Finding the exact moment of disengagement or the turning point of integration may be seen as the Holy Grail of retention scholars and college administrators alike.

Concurrent to the increase in interest in retention and persistence has been the increase in both the level of internationalization efforts at many campuses and the number of international students on American campuses. Attracted by the prospect of gaining an American education, international students come to America hoping to be a part of globalized education (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Andrade, 2009). Recognizing the need for expansion beyond the domestic students that most universities have historically served, college presidents and their respective schools have developed entire divisions of international marketing, global recruitment, and even academic departments with the aim of bringing in the diversity and dollars international students represent. Aided by EducationUSA, a State Department initiative whose mission is to promote interest in American universities worldwide, many universities claim to attract international students for the altruistic purpose of fostering friendship and understanding amongst American and international students (EducationUSA, 2015). Although this certainly does occur in many situations, certain research indicates that friendships between American and international students are often added challenges for international students (Al-Jasir, 1993; Jammaz, 1972).

Regardless of the challenges they face, including those connected to housing, transportation, unfamiliar settings, and potentially unwelcoming people, students from all over the world continue to flock to American institutions to be a part of university in
a new place (Andrade, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

According to the 2014 Open Doors report, 886,052 international undergraduate and graduate students are studying at American universities, which is an eight percent increase over the previous year. Although this number only represents a small portion of people studying at universities (4%), the saturation levels continue to rise, especially at institutions where internationalization is inherent to its mission (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014). Many of these students arrive to their schools after being heavily recruited through a series of education fairs, at least one educational agent, and a variety of materials, only to be met with oftentimes understaffed international student offices, professors with varying levels of training on non-native speakers, and domestic students who may or may not have met anyone outside of their respective counties and states (Altback & Teichler, 2001; Andrade, 2006, 2006-2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). These precarious conditions augment the challenges that almost all students face and perhaps add to the risk of attrition. To add to the challenges of retaining and integrating international students, from within the international community, subgroups exist.

Students from the same countries or even regions within certain countries band together, creating what Andrade (2006) called “ghettoization.” These subgroups may add to the complexity of allaying issues such as adjustment by perhaps creating a false integration to American university culture. In other words, instead of integrating socially through the creation homogenous social groups of like-minded yet diverse individuals, international students may only be interacting with other international students which provides a patina of integration and may not serve the students or their success (Andrade, 2006).
Despite the numerous precarious factors involved in international student education, relatively few studies on persistence have been conducted. Pointing to this hole in the research, Mamiseishvili (2012) wrote, “Research on international student persistence has largely been missing in the literature” (p. 2). He explained this phenomenon as a twofold issue. First, at the time of Mamiseishvili’s study, international students nationwide still only account for around 3% of students studying at universities. Additionally, international students are recruited with relatively stringent academic and English proficiency standards. Because of these standards, many consider international students as they would any other student at the university. In theoretical support of this belief, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and other Department of Education agencies do not consider international students as minorities (Evans, Carlin, & Potts, 2009). Defining “at-risk qualities”, Evans et al. (2009) maintained that the academic, social, and personal challenges that many minority students must overcome are also challenges that international students face.

More specifically, the academic, social, and personal challenges that women from Saudi Arabia must overcome in order to succeed at an American university are arguably different from other international students. Indeed, to even group all other international students into a monolithic group of “others” is fallacious. To date, the researcher could find no study exploring the academic persistence of women from Saudi Arabia that had been conducted. Beyond that, few studies have sought to explain the attrition of other international students (Evans et al., 2009; Mamiseishvili, 2012). Because of this lack of research and the climate set by state agencies wherein international students are either lumped in with American students or clustered together
as one faceless, shapeless group, persistence research in the field of international students is sparse.

In order to serve women from Saudi Arabia in more meaningful ways and in order to explore how female students from Saudi Arabia conform to or deviate from Tinto’s revised model of student retention (1997), this qualitative study will be conducted. Through narrative inquiry, this research will explore academic persistence for female students from Saudi Arabia who are currently studying at or who have graduated from a regional, four-year public university in the mid-south as an undergraduate or graduate student. For the purpose of this study, academic persistence is defined as the “desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7). Data collection was based on a series of three, in-depth phenomenological interviews with each of the eleven participants (Seidman, 2013). The interviews will be coded based on syntagmatic analysis of salutogenic factors and moments of epiphany found either on or off Tinto’s model. This approach will provide thorough, rich data that will give insight into how women from Saudi Arabia persist in American education.

**Purpose of the Study**

Because of the growing reliance on international students by colleges and universities for financial and diversity gains and because of the ethical standards that those same colleges and universities should follow (Fischer, 2015), it is incumbent upon university stakeholders to meet the aforementioned challenges with unique solutions. Beyond serving the needs of students who are currently studying at American universities, universities should look to prevent students from leaving by learning more
about the ways in which international students integrate, making more efforts to engage with the students, and researching ways to improve international student retention (Andrade & Evans, 2009).

The first step toward achieving these aims is to see international students not as one unit of students with the same needs but as a diverse group of students within a group. Suffice to say a male student from Vietnam differs greatly from a female student from Saudi Arabia, even if they are studying at the same institution. Both are considered international students, both speak a language that differs vastly from English, both are from Asia, both may be living away from home for the first time, and both may suffer similar levels of homesickness. The similarities, however, end there. Women from Saudi Arabia, many of whom studying in the United States because of the KASP, face challenges that make studying ways in which to serve them somewhat difficult. For example, Saudi women literally wear their differences on their sleeves in the form of *abaya*, *hijab*, and/or *niqab*. Arguably, these clothing choices create a perception of distance due to the uncanny factor in the West, making the women seem unapproachable to many (Read & Bartkowski, 2000). Nevertheless, as this study will show, women from Saudi Arabia study and succeed at American universities each year, sometimes despite, not because of, the university’s efforts to retain students.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore academic persistence for female students from Saudi Arabia who were currently studying at or who had graduated from a regional, four-year public university in the mid-south. For the function of this research, academic persistence was generally defined as the “desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through
degree completion” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7). A series of three face-to-face interviews were conducted with eleven female students from Saudi Arabia who were successfully progressing toward or had completed a bachelor’s degree in the United States (Seidman, 2013). The interviews were transcribed and coded using syntagmatic analysis. Instances of salutogenic moments and epiphanies were noted for importance and analyzed for meaning using Tinto’s revised model of student retention; deviances from the model were also noted (1997).

**Background**

For many international students, arriving in the United States is a lone endeavor. For others, they travel with or are greeted swiftly by groups of their countrymen and women. Students whose journey to the United States has been facilitated by a national scholarship program find themselves not only studying amongst unfamiliar Americans but also alongside friends, family, and fellow nationals whose paths have intentionally or unintentionally merged. For universities, scholarship programs have meant steady, reliable income in the form of tuition paid at international rates (Jiffry, 2013); for students, the Odyssean quality of studying abroad is appropriated by and replaced with a community within a community formed by the nature of the scholarship itself. In other words, instead of a student traveling and integrating alone, students from within the scholarship have a pre-chosen group of countrymen and women with whom to travel and study.

One of the most prominent and conspicuous scholarship programs in the last decade has been the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). As the fourth largest student population, students from Saudi Arabia represent a large portion of international
students at American public universities (IIE, 2014). This is perhaps because of the
King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). In 2005, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia
enacted the KASP, which would provide full scholarships and living expenses for any
Saudi national to study in Western, English-speaking countries. Since its inception, the
KASP has grown exponentially, serving over 150,000 Saudis studying in all corners in
the globe (SACM). According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, of the nearly
72,000 Saudi students currently studying at American institutions of higher education,
20% of them are women (SACM). This overall number, however, deviates from the
2014 Open Doors report, which indicates that 53,919 of international students studying
in the U.S. are from Saudi Arabia. This number still represents an impressive 21%
increase from the previous Open Doors report. The most recent SEVP report from July
2014 concurred, showing that about 78% of Western Asian students are male and around
22% are female (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2014).

More than sheer numbers, the agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United
States to educate young Saudi nationals has brought money to universities. Roughly
22.7 billion dollars has been funneled by the scholarship to universities in the United
States alone, affecting both the economic bottom line and the makeup of international
students and student populations as a whole (Jiffry, 2013). Men and women from Saudi
Arabia who have arrived and continue to arrive en masse add to the experiences of those
around them.

International students, Saudi students in particular, bring to American classrooms
difference. Difference can be interpreted, as Jacques Derrida did with différence, in
various ways (Murfin & Ray, 2003). Pragmatically speaking, students from Saudi
Arabia hail from a country that is one of the few remaining theocracies in the world. The vast majority, if not all Saudis, practice Islam, a religion that is gaining followers in the United States but, in many parts of the country, remains a minority religion. Ideas about gender roles, time constructs, contextual practices, and appealing to a higher authority that many Saudi students uphold clash with those of many American students (Pharaon, 2004). At their best, these differences can create a dialogue that is mutually beneficial to participants. As Derrida showed, however, it is not always simple to present a definitive picture of an interpretation, and these differences can create the opposite of friendship if misconstrued or misrepresented.

Beyond the unique differences that students from Saudi Arabia have, issues common to international students plague Saudi students just the same. Language differences that create isolation and alienation manifest themselves both in and out of the classroom, making integration difficult to say the least. Adjusting to a new educational system for all students is challenging. For domestic students, college represents a greater independence that is mutually exclusive with a greater need for self-reliance when it comes to their studies. For international students, these factors are augmented with other educational changes: discussion-based learning versus mostly lecture-based classes, contributing opinions in class versus listening only to the teacher, or asking questions that challenge the material and teacher versus holding questions until after class for an audience of friends (Evans et al., 2009). Beyond these unique issues, the same issues that lead to domestic students leaving college—homesickness, isolation, poor academic performance—are the ones international students face, perhaps even acutely because of the added elements of culture shock and language differences.

More than being integrated into a heterogeneous learning environment and being immersed in an environment where societal norms do not dictate that women fully cover their hair and bodies, women from Saudi Arabia may face challenges surrounding cultural immersion and integration, judgment, and being caught between a world of strict gender hierarchy and one containing everyone from those who subscribe to similar beliefs to those who question the very existence of gender (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Lindsey, 2012; Pharaon, 2004; Redden, 2013). For a woman from Saudi Arabia to receive KASP benefits, she must travel, live, and, in some cases, study with a male family member, often her husband or brother and less often her cousin (KASP). For women who are either without a male escort or choose to travel and live alone, all expenses must be paid by herself or her family. Those with the means and support to travel to the United States to study face certain challenges that are both common to all women from Saudi Arabia and unique to those who are here alone (Lindsey, 2012). The very wearing of hijab, or the practice of veiling, can increase the conspicuousness of the Otherness that surrounds them and perhaps may lead to perceptions of or actual prejudice (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Pasha-Zaidi, Masson, & Pennington, 2013; Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Said, 1979; Tawfig & Ogle, 2013). Additionally, cultural norms and mores that discourage the blending of men and women work against women who have only experienced a homosocial environment since puberty and are suddenly in an environment where heterosocial blending is encouraged and, in most cases, the norm (Pharaon, 2004). These distinct cultural experiences bleed into many Saudi women’s
educational experiences abroad, which could negatively affect their ability to persist and therefore lead to attrition. It is important, then, to explore the persistence of female students from Saudi Arabia who are studying at American institutions of higher education.

**Need and Significance of Study**

Current research pertaining to international student retention or the persistence of international students from specific countries remains incomplete and lacking. Earlier research conducted by Andrade (2006-2007) and Mamiseishvili (2012) explored the persistence of international students as unique individuals with needs greater than mainstream domestic students; however, this research track has remained stagnant with the exception of a few studies that conflates recruitment and retention (Özturgut, 2013). This research will build upon that research conducted previously by Andrade and others in the field. The purpose of this study is to specifically explore the factors that lead to the persistence of women from Saudi Arabia. Additional studies have explored the specific needs of students from Saudi Arabia (Al-Jasir, 1993; Brislin, 1981; Hall, 2013; Jammaz 1972); few particularly focused on female students from Saudi Arabia (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Tawfig & Ogle, 2013). No current research, however, seems to be specific to the persistence of female students from Saudi Arabia. No data as to whether or not they persist was present in the literature; moreover, the inherent differences between the education and expectations with which Saudi women leave their country and those to which they are held in the West make this study an important endeavor to understand how women from Saudi Arabia navigate a two-world system. Their success and these salutogenic factors that lead to success is worth
exploring.

For this reason alone, the research conducted in this study is overdue. Currently there are nearly a million international students studying in the United States, and a near majority of that number is comprised of men and women from Saudi Arabia. If universities and colleges have access to more information on how and why these students academically persist, it is possible for attrition to be prevented and more students to be served.

Research Questions

RQ1: How (or to what degree) are female students from Saudi Arabia socially and academically integrating into their institutions?

RQ2: What perceptions do female students from Saudi Arabia have of personal and institutional goals surrounding their success?

RQ3: How do female students from Saudi Arabia academically persist at American universities?

Rationale for Methodology

The research methodology utilized for this study was a qualitative narrative inquiry. Transcripts of interviews with female students from Saudi Arabia were analyzed using syntagmatic analysis in order to explore how they adhere to or deviate from Tinto’s revised model of student retention (1997). According to Cresswell (2009) qualitative research often includes interviews as conduits for the perceptions and truths of the interviewees. Interviews also act as a way to reveal specific events that have either enabled or hindered the educational persistence of women from Saudi Arabia (Hamdan, 2006, 2009). Moreover, Tinto (1997) himself used qualitative methods to
explore how students integrate into the systems in which they inhabit.

In this research interview data were gathered from women from Saudi Arabia who were currently successfully pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree or had successfully earned an undergraduate or graduate degree from a regional university in the mid-South in order to determine how they adhered to or deviated from Tinto’s (1997) revised model of student retention. Once known, the results of this research will better serve university and college officials in their student retention efforts. More specifically, this research will help universities understand the integration of international students, particularly female students from Saudi Arabia.

When considering what research methods to choose, quantitative approaches were considered. According to Patton (2002), quantitative analysis results in large-scale generalizations. Although this may be seen as a boon for retention research, the ways in which quantitative research is traditionally conducted—survey research and dataset analysis—are not conducive to both the language barriers that international students continually face and the nuanced, highly personal path of student success. For the women in this study, the how and why of persistence matters more than what can be found on a Likert scale. Therefore, quantitative research methods were not chosen.

This qualitative method allowed for an interview-based inquiry, which supports both the research questions and Tinto’s model. Additionally, qualitative methods are better suited for research that is exploratory in nature (Patton, 2002). In this study, interview data were analyzed to determine how and why female students from Saudi Arabia persist academically at an American university. This research sought to explore the persistence of this particular group of students.
Nature of the Research Design for the Study

This study consisted of a qualitative narrative inquiry research design. Marshall and Rossman (2011) contended that “narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed as they construct…stories about their lives” (p. 22). The intent of this research was to conduct a series of three, semi-structured interviews with female students from Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a narrative inquiry analysis method was utilized. Through extensive coding, how and why the respective students have persisted or persisted emerged. Additionally, how the women adhere to or deviate from Tinto’s revised model of student retention was explored (1997). The goal was to explore the salutogenic path of successful female students from Saudi Arabia who were studying at a regional university in the mid-South.

The sample consisted of eleven female students from Saudi Arabia who were currently studying or had studied at the same regional university in the mid-South for their bachelor’s degree. The sample was chosen based on a purposeful, snowball sampling technique. Patton (2002) explained that a snowball or chain sample is utilized when the researcher finds participants for the study through participants in the study. As Patton maintained, this method can enrich the sample by leading to more fitting and detailed examples for the study and more appropriate and willing interview participants.

Definition of Terms

Abaya: A long, cloak-like dress that loosely covers the body and arms of the wearer. Western-style clothing is usually worn underneath abayas. Some practicing Muslim women in the West choose not to wear an abaya and instead wear modest Western-style clothing. Women who practice Islam in the West and wear an abaya often choose
colorful or decorative abayas. Women in Saudi Arabia may only wear black abayas.

**Attrition:** A word referring to the phenomenon of students “who fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters” (Seidman, 2005, p. 7).

**Culture:** What one generation passes to the next in terms of discourse, beliefs, mores, actions, and objects (Henslin, 2006).

**Dropout:** A person or the action of failing to complete a bachelor’s degree after the goal was stated (Seidman, 2005).

**External Commitments:** Commitments of a student that are not connected to academics or progression. These may include commitments to family or work (Tinto, 1975).

**F-1 Visa (F-1 Student, F-1):** A student visa that allows for a person from outside of the United States to pursue full-time, degree-seeking study for a limited period of time.

**Focused Life History:** A participant’s thorough account of everything that happened during a period of time that is connected to the research (Seidman, 2013). For this research, the focused life history will connect to events that contributed to the participant traveling to the United States for study, the experiences and integration during the course of study, and, for some, the completion of study.

**Full-Time Student:** A person who is pursuing a degree and is enrolled in the number of hours designated by both the academic institution and the government immigration office that deem the student full-time.

**Ghettoization:** The phenomenon that occurs when international students form isolated living and social communities that contain only people from their respective countries (Andrade, 2006).

**Halal:** A method of slaughter and preparation of meat that aligns with the teachings of
Islam.

*Hijab:* A scarf that covers the hair of the wearer, leaving the face visible to others. This is often worn by women who practice Islam. In the West, it is acceptable for women to wear colorful *hijabs* in different styles; in Saudi Arabia, women are limited to black *hijabs* only.

*I-20:* A document that allows a foreign-born international student enter and exit the United States for the purpose of full-time study that is granted by educational institutions. In order to issue an I-20, the educational institution must have granted acceptance to the student and must have extensive evidence that the student can financially support herself. This document is used to secure a student visa to the United States and maintain one’s legal status while studying.

*IELTS:* International English Language Testing System. One of the two internationally-recognized language aptitude tests for undergraduate and graduate study at an English-speaking university.

*Institutional Commitment:* A commitment to an institution of higher education (Tinto, 1975).

*Koran (Qu’ran):* The holy book used by Muslims to practice Islam. It guides the religious lives of most, if not all, students from Saudi Arabia. It also informs many of the rules and social mores of those from Saudi Arabia.

*Ministry of Higher Education:* The governing body of Saudi Arabia that maintains and monitors the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. It also oversees the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, its manifestation in the United States.

*Niqab:* A manner of dress that includes an *abay,* a *hijab,* and a veil. This is most
commonly seen in Saudi Arabia, although some women who practice Islam in the West choose to dress in this manner.

*Persistence:* The “desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning...through degree completion” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7).

*Pre-Entry Attributes:* Attributes of and experiences had by a student prior to coming to college. These include high school curriculum and performance, familial engagement and socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity (Tinto, 1975)

*Retention:* The phenomenon of continuously enrolling a student from the time of admission to the institution to the time of graduation (Seidman, 2005).

*SACM (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission):* The arm of the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education that is located within the United States. The mission of SACM is to monitor, administer, and serve the students from Saudi Arabia and the scholarships they receive.

*S.E.V.I.S.:* The Student Exchange and Visitor Information System. The online government database through which government officials maintain records of international students studying in the United States.

*Shiite:* One of the two halves of the bifurcation within Islam. At roughly 15% of practicing Muslims, the Shiite branch is the minority branch of Islam whose followers believe in a divine line of succession from the Prophet Mohammed whose descendants shall lead Muslims (Esposito, 2002).

*Sunni:* One of the two halves of the bifurcation within Islam. At 85%, Sunni is the larger half of Islam; its followers believe in a political leader who is not divinely inspired as a political leader of Muslims (Esposito, 2002).

*Stopout:* The act of temporarily withdrawing from an institution (Seidman, 2005). For
an international student, stopping out would mean mandatorily returning home, creating
a need for a renewed or entirely new visa before being able to return to the United
States.

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language. One of the two internationally-
recognized language aptitude tests for undergraduate and graduate study at an English-
speaking university.

U.S.C.I.S.: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. This branch of the
Department of Homeland Security is charged with monitoring immigration in the United
States. Its mission is to “secure America’s promise as a nation of immigrants by
providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and
citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and
ensuring the integrity of our immigration system” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration
Services, 2015).

Veil: A separate piece of cloth that covers the face of the wearer below the eyes.
Withdrawal: The “departure of a student from a college or university campus”
(Seidman, 2005, p. 7). For international students, withdrawal means the mandatory
transfer to another institution or a return to their home.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

As with anything connected to international students, a series of assumptions
underlies this research. First, there is an assumption, as was discussed earlier, that all
international students have the same or similar challenges and barriers to overcome. The
tendency to generalize a myriad group of students from literally hundreds of countries
can be seen in both research and practice. Additionally, there is an assumption that once
an international student enters the university—either through successful completion of a language program or with a qualifying score on a language aptitude test—that that student possesses fluency and therefore can operate on the same level as a domestic student whose first language is English. Finally, assumptions connected with women from Saudi Arabia and from the Middle East as a whole underlie this research. The assumption that these women are inherently submissive, introverted, and guarded, and therefore cannot fully integrate into a university, permeates some of the research.

Assumptions that are directly connected to this study in particular are also present. First, in choosing this particular location to conduct the study, the researcher assumes responses were somewhat unique and meaningful based on the location. Arguably, the same study conducted in a more urban or more rural setting would yield altered responses. Additionally to the setting of this study, there is an assumption that the methodological approach used in this study will engendered trust with the participants that is built upon the researcher’s previous knowledge. In other words, because the researcher has a great deal of prior knowledge and interaction with this particular culture, a certain amount of trust had already been established when the research had begun, which, meaningful to this population, will provide a positive impact on responses and reduce bias (Pharaon, 2004).

The data have been delimited by restricting participants to one regional comprehensive university in the mid-South; responses from women from Saudi Arabia studying at other universities in different regions of the United States with varying numbers of other Saudi students might yield results unlike those found here. The sample size was also a delimitation set by the researcher. Employing snowball sampling will
create a limitation on the control for representativeness of sample. The researcher took
steps to create an initial contact list that is representative of the population; however, the
recommendations of the participants may have aligned with the participants themselves.
Finally, outside of the sample, the researcher cannot control for the environment that
surrounds the population of Muslim women. The number of practicing Muslims, both
Saudi and non-Saudi, and the degree of openness to this faith in the community cannot
be controlled.

Summary of Chapters

This research is divided into five chapters, each with respective subsections.
Chapter One has provided an overview of the study’s purpose, its background, and
potential significance. Chapter Two provides a review of literature that covers research
on retention and attrition of all students and international students in particular, the
importance of internationalization, attitudes of and toward international students by
faculty and students alike, students from Saudi Arabia, and women from Saudi Arabia
and surrounding Gulf Arab countries who are studying in the United States and other
English-speaking environments in the West. Chapter Three outlines the methodology
used in the study, including the interview rationale and process, the methods of coding,
and the framework for interpretation. Chapter Four details the findings of the in-depth
interviews. The chapter is organized based on the themes that emerged from the
interviews as they fit within or outside of Tinto’s (1997) revised model of student
retention. To close, Chapter Five includes a discussion of the findings, and
recommendations made for American university administrators, instructors, and
retention researchers.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Amongst the extensive research on persistence theories, few studies focus on international students alone. This review of literature focuses on the broader nature of persistence, international students, and students from Saudi Arabia, respectively. For each aspect of this study, much has been published. In the area of persistence, multiple theorists have stepped forward to provide models for student success or student dropout. As a result of their brainchildren, other researchers in the field of student persistence have supported, critiqued, deconstructed, tested, retested, and questioned the models. For Tinto’s models in particular, some have drawn attention to its lack of consideration for both minority and non-traditional students or ways of attainment (Al-Harthi, 2005; Tierney, 1992). In the area of internationalization, contemporary researchers have written about the push for diversity and dollars in the last quarter of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Because of major recruitment efforts to gain and major influx of international students, researchers have had opportunities to explore the motivations and needs of international students, what adjustment factors they must overcome, how they are received by faculty and staff, and at what rates they persist.

In the specific area of students from Saudi Arabia, the seemingly overnight arrival of literally hundreds of Saudi nationals in many public institutions has created a situation ripe for discussion and scholarship. General information about Saudi Arabia has been published in more mediums due to those seeking more details about the students they serve. Additionally, scholars as early as the 1970s explored the
relationships between Saudis and Americans, from a student to student level and a
global level. Few studies, however, have focused on female students from Saudi Arabia,
perhaps because of the low quantities that universities have seen. To date and to this
researcher’s knowledge, no study has been conducted on the persistence of female
students from Saudi Arabia.

What is presented in this chapter is a theoretical framework based on persistence
literature, with a focus on those studies conducted by and as a reaction to Tinto, and an
additional focus on those studies that center on or recognized the unique nature of
international students. A selective review of internationalization, including research that
focuses on the environment in which international students immerse, the motivations,
needs, and adjustment factors of international students, and specific studies on the
persistence of international students are included in this chapter. Finally, a brief
overview of Saudi culture and students from Saudi Arabia will lead the section on
female students from Saudi Arabia and research conducted to detail their particular
needs.

Persistence Theories

Despite the amount of work that has gone into studying retention and persistence,
colleges and universities continue to seek ways to explain why some students succeed
and others do not (Tinto, 2005). The first extensive examination of student mortality is
McNeely’s 1938 study, “College Student Mortality,” which was commissioned by the
Although the study was to be commended by McNeely’s contemporaries for its
exhaustive examination of the impact of factors such as institutional size, housing
options, gender and age of student, and proximity to home, and for noting the reasons for and time of student departure, it did not establish a framework or model for student retention. The study, however, laid a foundation on which future retention theorists would build.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the field of retention studies boomed alongside the rest of higher education due mostly in part to the G.I. Bill, which, along with the Higher Education Act of 1965, arguably democratized higher education in the United States (Thelin, 2004). In 1970, Spady published a sociological model of student dropout in higher education. Basing his model in part on Durkheim’s suicide model (something Tinto also would later do), Spady (1970) maintained that five aspects of academic life contributed to social integration and could be directly linked to attrition when paired with satisfaction and commitment: academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. Five years after Spady and using the same suicidality framework, Tinto published his model of student integration. Although both researchers maintained that integration was key, Tinto (1975) went further by positing that both formal and informal academic experiences, along with social integration, matters to student retention. Additionally, Tinto’s model examined areas of commitment to and by the institution, academic goals of the student, and overall career goals of the student as aspects that lead to or deter from retention. Later, Astin’s (1977, 1985) model would find a positive correlation between the amount of physical and psychological energy invested an education experience and the likelihood of persistence. Both Tinto’s and Astin’s models became definitive for many institutions leading into the 1980s (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).
By the 1980s, universities who had enjoyed the influx of more students with the G.I. Bill began to see a decline in students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Enrollment management became key for universities who were committed to keeping the precious few students they had enrolled (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Just in time for this new wave of interest, Bean (1980) added to the idea of student retention the background characteristics of the student, such as prior learning and socioeconomic status. He also began to differentiate the reasons for leaving for men versus women, and he found them to be different. Three years later, Bean (1983) revised his model to include the influence of peers on determining a student’s success. Two years after that, along with Metzner, Bean (1985) expanded his model to include an examination of traditional versus nontraditional students. Both Bean’s and studies using Bean’s model have discovered that students’ satisfaction is affected by their perceptions of organizational routinization, participation, communication, and rewards, which in turn affects retention. (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

By the 1990s, researchers began to expand on these theories, challenging their longevity in a quickly-changing world (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Braxton et al. (1997; as cited in Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 24) challenged Tinto’s model and found that social integration weighed more heavily on a student’s likelihood to depart than his or her academic integration. Braxton (2000) narrowed the fifteen propositions of Tinto’s model to four: (1) students arrive to college with different characteristics that will affect their initial commitment to the institution, (2) initial commitment to the institution will then in turn affect a student’s future commitment, (3) the continued commitment is enriched by early social integration, and (4) overall, a greater level of commitment to the
institution means a greater likelihood of success. Tinto himself recognized a need to alter his model, and did so in 1997 and later in 2005. He has remained one of the leading voices in retention theory.

Looking to the future, theorists worked to add depth to the field of retention by offering customized examinations of departments, student services, and other minor aspects of college life (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto (2006-2007) quite recently offered a three-part lesson for the future of retention theory. His first lesson is this: Students do not leave for the opposite of the reasons they stay. In other words, as Tinto put it, “It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed” (p. 6). He suggested a model of effective policies and programs that is easily accessible to universities, which led to his second lesson. Programs must be effectively and fully implemented in a way that allows for endurance and longevity. His final lesson is to see the gap between low-income and high-income students decrease by moving beyond the superficial numbers to focus on what he called “the critical issue of equity” (p. 10). Learning to reach the students who are most at-risk for dropping out will ultimately lead to higher retention rates.

Of the many perspectives on persistence, Tinto’s voice has remained consistently present. His groundbreaking 1975 original model and 1997 revised model of student persistence remain the foundation of a multitude of studies of student persistence to this day.

**Tinto’s Revised Model of Student Persistence.**

Tinto’s original Student Integration Model (1975) differentiated itself from other models in that it attempted to identify specific types of student withdraw—rather than
the general moniker of dropout as previous studies did—and examined the level of student integration involved in persistence. Basing the model of Durkheim’s theory of suicide, Tinto posited that the more a student integrated into the society of school—both academic and social—the less likely that student was to withdraw. The model has undergone intense scrutiny, some by none other than Tinto himself.

In 1997, Tinto revised his model to incorporate the elements of external commitments, time spent in the classroom, the quality of student effort, and learning. In his study, Tinto (1997) utilized two methodologies—a longitudinal panel survey and a qualitative case study—to study first year students. For the survey part of the research, two sets of surveys were administered to the same sample. Of those taken, the first survey set yielded 517 results, and the second survey set yielded 287 results. The data gathered utilizing the survey were then matched with GPA, semester-to-semester enrollment, and student demographic data. The case study arm of the research was conducted over the course of three, one-week observation periods using participant observation, interviews, and document review. The survey side of the research yielded results on persistence that connected with GPA, hours spent studying, perceptions of faculty, participation in certain courses, and involvement with other students. Through the case study research, Tinto found that building supportive peer groups, participating in shared learning experiences, and being an active voice in learning experiences all led to greater academic and social integration.

The impact of the findings for each part of the study affected the conclusions of the study. First, for Tinto, more importance should be placed on creating a community of learners. In these communities, learners can rely on each other for learning, creating
a multitude of voices that includes but is not limited to the instructor’s voice. Through learning communities, students perceive a higher level of learning and are engaged more, even in environments or situations wherein engagement is a challenge. To capture the multi-layered aspects of university, Tinto maintained,

Colleges can be seen as consisting not merely of multiple communities, but of overlapping and sometimes nested academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways. By extension, the broader process of academic and social integration (involvement) can be understood as emerging from student involvement with faculty and student peers in the communities of the classrooms. It is a complex multidimensional process, which links classroom engagement with faculty and student peers to subsequent involvement in the larger academic and social communities of the college. (p. 617)

In each classroom, therein exists a microcosm of learning and involvement that affects student persistence.

The results of this research led to a revision of Tinto’s (1975) model (Fig. 1). The model, however, was still not to Tinto’s own satisfaction. In the closing comments of his study, he recognized that the academic sphere existed within a larger social sphere, and this nested reality is not accurately portrayed in the two-dimensional resulting graphic. Nevertheless, Tinto’s (1997) model emerged as a tool that others would critique and deconstruct (Figure 1). Although the model recognizes the importance of social interactions within the classroom and other learning communities, the changes did not address the needs of all students. In particular, the model allows for the social integration of non-traditional students, like those who are not of traditional
college age and those who commute, but both the original and the revised model virtually ignored the specific needs of ethnic minorities (Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 2005).

Figure 1. Tinto’s revised model of student persistence.

**Persistence Theories**

Although it is has been used as a framework for many years, Tinto’s (1975) original model of student attrition has been criticized for its ethnocentric design. Shortly after Tinto’s initial publication, Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) examined the main and interaction effects of student characteristics and measures of social and academic integration on first-year withdrawal decisions. Part of their conclusion included a finding that the various measures of social and academic integration were not independent of particular background characteristics. In other words, they wrote, “Even if particularly effective institutional programs or policies designed to reduce student withdrawal could be established (e.g., increasing opportunities for student-faculty informal contact), it may well be that the positive benefits of those policies or programs
will accrue differentially rather than generally” (p. 209). Tierney (1992) also called Tinto’s model into question for its lack of attention to students who are ethnic and racial minorities who may withdraw from universities because they cannot adapt to a hegemonic culture. The lack of role models, peers, and advisors who connect with students from various ethnic backgrounds interfere with their success. Because their backgrounds may value collectivism over individualism (Al-Harthi, 2005; Hofstede, 1993), ethnic minorities, including international students, may have more difficulties adapting alone.

**Internationalization**

Institutions of higher education turn to internationalization for a number of reasons; chief among them is an increase in profit (Altbach & Knight, 2006). The impact of international students on individual schools can be powerful, but this does not in any way dwarf the impact international students have on the economy of the United States. According to the 2014 Open Doors Report, international students contributed 27 billion dollars to the U.S. economy, a number representing an all-time high (IIE, 2014). Table 1 (IIE, 2014) shows contributions of international students by state in the academic year 2013-2014.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th># of Foreign Students</th>
<th>Tuition and Fees (millions)</th>
<th>Living Expenses and Dependents (millions)</th>
<th>Less U.S. Support (millions)</th>
<th>Total Contribution (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Alabama</td>
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<td>$137.8</td>
<td>$110.4</td>
<td>$65.8</td>
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<td>$8.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Average Income 1</td>
<td>Average Income 2</td>
<td>Average Income 3</td>
<td>Average Income 4</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
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<td>$801.2</td>
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<td>$10.7</td>
<td>$3.1</td>
<td>$13.1</td>
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<td>$10.0</td>
<td>$27.4</td>
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<td>$1,459.5</td>
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<td>$122.1</td>
<td>$125.0</td>
<td>$54.4</td>
<td>$192.7</td>
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<td>$21.4</td>
<td>$13.4</td>
<td>$48.2</td>
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<td>$1.3</td>
<td>$1.8</td>
<td>$0.7</td>
<td>$2.4</td>
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</table>
Beyond the connection to the economic bottom line, American universities stand to gain global significance, add to the experiences of domestic students, and contribute to a global academic society by hosting international students on their campuses. These gains may be multiplied when a university’s international student population is reflective of a global society. When Americans interact with students from a variety of places, they ultimately gain a better worldly knowledge (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). Table 2 (IIE, 2014) details the top 25 countries that contribute international students to the United States. Historically, China and India have been among the top countries that contribute students to the United States, a fact that has not changed in the most recent data. However, countries with government scholarship programs, like Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Iran, and Kuwait, are slowly gaining ground. Of the countries listed in Table 2, those four countries experienced double-digit increase over the last two academic years.

Table 2

*Top 25 Places of Origin Of International Students, 2012/13 - 2013/14*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>2012/13</th>
<th>2013/14</th>
<th>2013/14 % of Total</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>235,597</td>
<td>274,439</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>96,754</td>
<td>102,673</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>70,627</td>
<td>68,047</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>-3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>44,566</td>
<td>53,919</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>27,357</td>
<td>28,304</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>21,867</td>
<td>21,266</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>19,568</td>
<td>19,334</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Virginia | 17,145 | $375.8 | $281.3 | $169.6 | $487.5 |
| Washington | 25,554 | $443.9 | $435.8 | $142.7 | $737.0 |
| West Virginia | 2,733 | $45.6 | $41.5 | $21.8 | $65.3 |
| Wisconsin | 11,718 | $248.9 | $168.8 | $109.1 | $308.6 |
| Wyoming | 1,124 | $11.9 | $16.4 | $7.5 | $20.7 |
8 Vietnam  16,098  16,579  1.9  3.0
9 Mexico  14,199  14,779  1.7  4.1
10 Brazil  10,868  13,286  1.5  22.2
11 Turkey  11,278  10,821  1.2  -4.1
12 Iran  8,744  10,194  1.2  16.6
13 United Kingdom  9,467  10,191  1.2  7.6
14 Germany  9,819  10,160  1.1  3.5
15 France  8,297  8,302  0.9  0.1
16 Nepal  8,920  8,155  0.9  -8.6
17 Hong Kong  8,026  8,104  0.9  1.0
18 Nigeria  7,316  7,921  0.9  8.3
19 Indonesia  7,670  7,920  0.9  3.3
20 Thailand  7,314  7,341  0.8  0.4
21 Kuwait  5,115  7,288  0.8  42.5
22 Colombia  6,543  7,083  0.8  8.3
23 Venezuela  6,158  7,022  0.8  14.0
24 Malaysia  6,791  6,822  0.8  0.5
25 Spain  5,033  5,350  0.6  6.3

Fischer (2015) noted the marked decrease in in-state freshman coming to 69 public universities from the year 2006 to 2012. The significant decrease—nearly 1,300 in the case of Purdue University—was complemented and allayed by increases in international students at every university. In other words, if universities were to continue to rely on local, in-state students, they would be in economic dire straits.

The world total from Table 2 is the result of over fifty years of growth in the field of international education. Table 3 (IIE, 2014) shows that since the academic year 1948-49, the percentage of international students enrolled at American institutions of higher educations has only declined four times: 1971/72, 2003/04, 2004/05, and 2005/06. All but the first year listed can be explained by the strict, post-9/11 immigration laws enacted by President George W. Bush. In all other years, the United States has seen an increase in international students.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrolled Int'l Students</th>
<th>Optional Practical Training (OPT)</th>
<th>Total Int'l Students</th>
<th>Annual % Change</th>
<th>Total Enrollment(^1)</th>
<th>% Int'l</th>
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<td>2007/08</td>
<td>567,039</td>
<td>623,805</td>
<td>56,766</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>18,248,000</td>
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<td>605,015</td>
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<td>66,601</td>
<td>7.7</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
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<td>67,804</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>647,246</td>
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<td>4.7</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
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<td>764,495</td>
<td>85,157</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>20,625,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>724,725</td>
<td>819,644</td>
<td>94,919</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>21,253,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>780,055</td>
<td>886,052</td>
<td>105,997</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>21,216,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Data from the National Center for Education Statistics.
2The data collection process was changed in 1974/75. Refugees were counted from 1975/76 to 1990/91.

Although many institutions have gone beyond simply opening their doors to international students and have rigorously recruited and sought students from around the globe, few have looked past simply getting students on American soil and focused on the issues these students face upon arrival (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Perrucci & Hu, 1995). Those who have been tasked with recruiting international students must look first to the ever-changing reasons students come to the United States.

**Motivations of International Students**

The reasons students choose the United States over other English-speaking nations has drastically changed in the past fifty years. As Altbach and Teichler (2001) pointed out, students in the 1980s came to the United States to gain what they believed was the best education in the world, to seek opportunities for immigration and career, to
access fellowships, scholarships, and support systems, and to master the English language, arguably the world’s dominant language. Although many of these reasons are still relevant and applicable, other English-speaking and industrialized nations have become more competitive in terms of power, academic prowess, and structured programs (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). The marketing teams of universities abroad have also upgraded their approaches in order to gain international students. Concurrent to competitors abroad entering the field in a more competitive nature, universities in the United States have taken steps backward in attracting international students. Tuition for international students at most American universities is double if not triple what domestic students pay. This is ostensibly to cover the special programing and support needed by international students; however, most universities have cut international programming and support programs due to across the board budget cuts (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Despite the cuts in international programming, international students continue to choose to study in the United States. A student’s reasons for studying abroad are due to either “push” factors or “pull” factors. The push factors “operate within the source country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study”, while the pull factors “operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). In their study, Mazzarol and Soutar found four push factors that led students to study abroad: the perception that an overseas education was better than one in their home countries, the unavailability of programs in their home countries, the difficulty of entry into programs in their home countries, and the desire to gain more knowledge about the West. Pull factors were dominated by a student’s knowledge of the destination country. Because of the
proliferation of media surrounding the United States, many students abroad, as Mazzarol and Soutar pointed out, have ready access to information about their future homes, albeit skewed and unrealistic information.

Using the push and pull factors, other researchers have come to similar conclusions about why international students choose to study abroad. Kim (2001) found that the reputation of the institution and costs connected to tuition and living are both influential in the application process for an international student. Prior to their arrival, international students did not rate student services or non-academic factors about the school (e.g., community) as important in their decisions to apply, according to Kim. Important to institutions in Kim’s findings was the fact that after primary choice conditions were met, the timeliness and personal nature of correspondence from the school to the student rated highly on his or her decision to enroll.

Becker and Kolster (2012) provided an extensive list of push and pull factors in their study. Push factors not prominently mentioned in the aforementioned research were the overall value of an international higher education degree in the student’s domestic labor market (nearly mutually exclusive to the low value of a degree in the student’s home country), personal or linguistic ties to the host country, unfavorable conditions in the student’s country of origin, and favorable economic or emigration policies in the host country. Pull factors included the availability of information on the host country, the reputation, costs, availability, and quality of the education in the host country, a mutual recognition of degrees by the host country and the original country), and the safety levels within the country. Once these factors align, the student makes the decision to study abroad, and arrives at the university, he or she must begin to maneuver
amongst those who understand and those who do not.

**Faculty Reaction to Internationalization**

Many faculty members reported high levels of interactions with international students, and their perceptions of these students manifested themselves in their interactions with them, which may impact student persistence (Stohl, 2007). Zamel (1995) informally surveyed instructors and concluded that many faculty see the presence of international students as constraining to their work. In fact, Zamel characterized this phenomenon to be addressed as the “ESL Problem” (p. 507). To combat these perceptions, other researchers offer solutions. Stohl (2007) implored universities to work to engage faculty in internationalization efforts by emphasizing the reward of learning and discovery of international scholarship as a way to allay negative perceptions of international students.

Following Stohl, Cooper and Mitsunaga (2010) encouraged cross-national collaborations amongst faculty in order to increase faculty members’ awareness and understanding of internationalization and the challenges international students face. Some instructors go beyond simply tolerating international students. Sawir (2011) discovered that instructors from particular “soft” disciplines (arts, economics, and business) reported making adjustments to teaching and curricula to accommodate the needs of international students, while those instructors from the “hard” disciplines (science and engineering) reported making fewer adjustments. Even with adjustments to teaching, international students still face challenges in the faculty members’ eyes. Cao and Kang (2011) reported that instructors are concerned with international students’ academic writing and reading abilities, and almost half of those surveyed were
concerned about the students’ abilities to remain in compliance with academic integrity standards. Their concerns are not unfounded. Because they are on the front lines with international students, faculty must meet the needs of international students on a daily basis.

**Needs of International Students**

Understanding the needs of international students is a challenge for those who have never been in their situation. First, it is important to note that the needs of international students go beyond simply offering them acceptance and an F-1 visa; this ignorance is augmented by the pervasive, yet false, idea that once a student is admitted to a university, then he or she need no additional support in or time for adjustment (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). The idea that international students are not a group with specific needs is inherently false. Mamiseishvili (2012) perhaps put it best: “No matter how prepared international students are academically, how proficient they are in English, or how familiar they are with U.S. cultural norms, they still face unique challenges to succeed in a foreign environment away from friends, family, and familiar surroundings” (p. 2). Suggesting that an international student’s needs go beyond those of a domestic student is not a stretch. Evans et al. (2009) maintained

All students who transition into a new environment face adjustment issues; a university can be an intimidating place for any new student. However, international students come to U.S. campuses with vastly dissimilar backgrounds and frames of reference from those of U.S. students. Their uncertainties about university life are magnified because they have to undertake university challenges often in a second language and almost always in a culture that is both
literally and figuratively thousands of miles from the familiar. (p. 26)

Perhaps nothing is more intimidating than attempting to achieve academically in a second language.

Leading second language researchers suggest that fluency is a process that is developed through both acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1982). Some second language acquisition researchers suggest it takes students five to ten years to develop what Hill and Flynn (2006) called advanced fluency, meaning they have mastered speaking, reading, writing, and comprehending language. Cummins (1979) differentiated between two types of fluency in order to draw a distinction between those who can operate on a conversational level in a second language (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills or BICS) and those who can understand academic language in abstract, decontextualized situations (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP). If immersed in a language situation, one can become proficient in BICS within two to three years. To get to the level of understanding abstract and advanced concepts in a second language, one must spend seven to ten years operating in that second language.

For adults who are immersed in a second language environment, becoming proficient in the language is a more fluid process than learning it through foreign language learning in their home countries. That being said, many students are admitted to universities through one of two standardized tests: TOEFL or IELTS. Although these tests act as a gold standard for many universities, the degree to which they measure academic English fluency and the degree to which they predict academic success has been called into question by some researchers (Thompson, 2001; Van Troyer, 1986; Xin,
Johnson (1988) found that when English proficiency levels were low, standardized tests like the TOEFL could predict academic success; however, once English proficiency levels were higher, and more nuanced, factors like motivation, prior knowledge in the subject area, financial security, and cultural adaptability mattered more than the test score. Suffice to say most if not all non-native speakers of English who are considered international students on a university campus require English language support (Hanover Research, 2010; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

Outside of English language support, international students require special attention with regards to factors that are extraneous to most in academia but essential to the students themselves. Students who arrive to regional campuses are often shocked by the lack of public transportation (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Housing becomes an issue when international students do not have the means or the time to move out of dorms for breaks (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Food options on campus also become scarce during breaks and, at some universities, over the weekend. Even during regular dining hall hours, the availability of food that meets sociocultural and religious needs may also be a need for students. Practicing Muslims who adhere to halal food standards may find an absence of meat options. Other non-pork and non-alcohol consuming students may also unknowingly violate religious doctrines by consuming food that has been cooked with bacon or wine. Although these needs may been perceived as things international students need to overcome themselves as a part of earning a diploma, they may undoubtedly become barriers to success when paired with homesickness and other elevated stress (Andrade, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The adjustment factors that lead to the success of international students are multilayered and complex.
Adjustment Factors of International Students

Those who leave their families’ homes and move to a university in order to both live and study must adjust academically and socially (Tinto, 1975). Although Tinto pointed out that the university’s proximity to one’s childhood home is actually positively correlated to academic and social integration, he was not taking into account the thousands of miles from home many international students are (Tinto, 1975). Separated from their homes, families, culture, and language, international students must adjust oftentimes despite low English proficiency, academic skills that may not be valued in the West, and educational backgrounds that may not have prepared them for university in the United States (Andrade, 2006; Zamel, 1995). Overcoming these barriers in order to adjust takes action and motivation on both the student’s and university’s part (Andrade, 2006; Hanover, 2010)

For many international students, building a social network of support is paramount to success (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002-2003). In their study, Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002-2003) discovered that the strength of an international student’s social network lead to adjustment and an allaying of both loneliness and homesickness. Moreover, the researchers maintained that having a social support system was more important to the satisfaction of international students than to domestic, American students. They did, however, contend that the number of friends an international student has does not predict his or her satisfaction with his or her social network. Baba and Hosoda (2014) came to similar conclusions in their study. Using Barrera’s (1988) models of social support, Baba and Hosoda examined the relationships among stress factors (such as academic pressure, financial stress, homesickness, and culture shock),
social support, and cross-cultural adjustment. They found that cross-cultural adjustment was enabled by social support. Reported high levels of social support acted as a partial mediator of both stress factors and cross-cultural adjustment. Their results, however, showed that social support did not completely assuage the negative effects of stress factors on cross-cultural adjustment.

Despite having a strong personal social support system, fully adjusting to a new academic and foreign social culture without institutional support is a daunting task for most international students given the barriers they face. Examining the role of institutions in the adjustment of international students, Lee and Rice (2007) contended that institutions need to create and encourage cross-national learning environments to engender adaptation of international students. This idea is based on their findings that international students are often disappointed and alarmed by the level of discrimination they encounter. In their study, Lee and Rice found that Asian, Indian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern students reported practices based on imperialistic attitudes, physical differences, and Othering (Said, 1979). Those studying abroad in the United States who displayed more European or Eurocentric physical attributes reported fewer instances of discrimination. These findings agree with those found by Yeh and Inose (2003), who discovered that international students from Europe reported experiencing less acculturative stress than international students from Asia, Central/Latin America, and Africa. They also found that level of fluency in English, amount of satisfaction with social support, and concentration of social connectedness all predicted acculturative stress.

As daunting as larger, more socioacademic barriers to adjustment are, the
aggregation of micro-stressors can act as an impediment to adjustment. Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) discovered that initial efforts in establishing housing and transportation, gathering and maintaining important documents, and settling into a routine created major concerns for students at the start of their time of study. Once they were settled, the international students in the study reported challenges in understanding American students and professors and participating in the classroom environment. After overcoming many of the initial barriers to understanding the basics of university life in America, international students reported issues maneuvering the health care system, including so much difficulty that they reported self-medicating or forgoing treatment. These instances of micro-level stressors can become augmented, especially when paired with the macro-stresses of acculturation.

The physicality and background of a student also comes into context when considering adaptation. More specifically, the characteristics of a student’s cultural background influences the ease of adaptation. Tomich et al. (2003) maintained that students of European descent had fewer challenges adapting to American higher education than students from Asia. They added that personal attributes, such as an open and resilient personality, can contribute to the students’ success in adaptation. Their findings dovetailed with those who found that students from countries that are seen as unfavorable in the West have a more difficult time adjusting (Becker & Kolster, 2012).

Beyond a student’s personality, his or her choices can mitigate the challenges of adaptation. Zimmerman (2009) found that a willingness and ability to communicate with domestic students will lead an international student to adapt to his or her surroundings with greater ease. This interaction might be facilitated by the university,
which would decrease the time it takes for a student to become comfortable with instigating conversation with Americans (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). These interactions add to the student’s satisfaction of his or her experience and decrease uncertainty. Creation of opportunities to interact with Americans, according to Zimmerman, should be a key goal for university administration and faculty.

The types of interactions that occur in an American classroom amongst students and faculty are unique from a world perspective. Many international students have experienced only teacher-centric learning, wherein the teacher is the provider of information and the student is the consumer (Andrade, 2006). Any interaction between the teacher and the student in these cultures is of the highest formality, a practice that when accustomed to by a student often leads to shock and confusion when he or she experiences or witnesses the oftentimes informal interactions between teachers and students in the United States (Jiang Bresnahan & Cai, 2000). Adjusting to the classroom culture of a university is nearly second nature to domestic students who not only have experience interacting with instructors in this manner during primary and secondary school but also have a distinct grasp of the myths and mores of an American university (Schutz & Richards, 2003). Beyond the level of formality (or informality) that exists amongst faculty and students, the grading system, nature of work and homework, and normative classroom behavior are all new to international students who may not even be aware of a need for adjustment to these aspects (Evans et al., 2009). If adjustment is left to the student, he or she may at best experience greater acculturative stress or at worse withdraw emotionally or literally (Evans et al., 2009). Understanding this phenomenon is key to understanding how or why international students persist.
International Student Persistence

With the numerous precarious factors involved in international student education, relatively few studies on persistence have been conducted (Evans et al., 2009; Mamiseishvili, 2012). To revisit Mamiseishvili (2012): “Research on international student persistence has largely been missing in the literature” (p. 2). He explained this phenomenon as a twofold issue. First, at the time of his research, international students nationwide still only accounted for around 3% of students studying at universities—a number that has in three years increased by one percent (IIE, 2014). Additionally, international students are recruited with relatively stringent academic and English proficiency standards, so it is no leap to assume they will be academically prepared for university-level work. Even in the few studies of international student retention, researchers are finding that the latter observation is a gross oversimplification of a complex issue.

In her study, Andrade (2006-2007) identified key factors that contribute to international students’ success, namely persistence. Her focus centered on the balance between a succumbing to total assimilation and maintaining one’s cultural integrity. Using qualitative inquiry with constructivist methodology, Andrade interviewed students using open-ended, ethnographic interview techniques. The sample was derived from the international student population at a small, private, religiously-affiliated university. It consisted of 17 students mostly from East Asian and Polynesian countries. It is worth noting that these students are mostly sponsored by the university through a work study program because “[t]he university has a specific mission to provide educational opportunities to international students from Polynesia and Asia who are affiliated with
the religion of the university” (p. 63). Through interviews with the students, Andrade identified factors leading to the persistence of international students at an American university. These factors were identified as balancing academic responsibilities, work, and social life; adjusting to an academic environment different from their respective home countries; and gaining confidence in their abilities both in and out of the classroom. Overall, the students did not feel their adjustments were caustic to their respective cultural integrity.

Mamiseishvili (2012) examined the characteristics of international students in their first years of college and found factors that influenced their success. Basing the research on assumptions, the author points to unique challenges international students face despite high levels of academic preparedness, English proficiency, and knowledge of U.S. cultural norms. Using quantitative methodologies, Mamiseishvili based the study on established persistence models, namely those of Tinto, Pascarella and Terenzini, and Bean. Astin’s (1977, 1985) input-environment-outcomes model was also utilized. The sample of the study was taken from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study data set. A sample of 200 international students pulled from the 23,090-student data set was identified. The author found that academics have a high impact on first-year international students. Additionally, students enrolled in remedial English classes in their first year were less likely to persist than students who enrolled in mainstream English classes. Overall, the author found that determination to obtain a degree and goal-oriented behaviors have the biggest impact on international student persistence. Not coincidentally, these are the same factors that lead to the success and persistence of domestic students (Seidman, 2005). Unlike their domestic counterparts,
international student persistence was negatively affected by social integration. The author noted that this phenomenon could be based on how social engagement was measured in the data set—through participation in clubs, sports, and fine arts activities. Finally, the author closed with the importance of collaboration between offices of international student services and other academic and support teams to promote international student persistence.

Focusing on both recruitment and retention, Özturgut (2013) explored the university’s role in stewarding international student from their home countries to the United States for study. Employing qualitative research methods, the researcher constructed a survey and distributed it to university personnel in the area of international admissions at top 40 schools. The sample of 53 respondents consisted of program directors, international academic program representatives, and other administrators connected to internationalization at their respective institutions. Four themes specific to retention and persistence emerged from the data: international student and scholar services staff; academic programing and support; social and cultural engagement and support; and financial aid, health services, religious support, and immigration support. Based on the results, Özturgut developed a model of recruitment and retention for international students, pointing out that relating to and communicating with international students will lead to higher retention rates.

**Students from Saudi Arabia**

Due greatly in part to the KASP, Saudi students represent the fourth-largest student population studying abroad (IIE, 2014). Table 4 (IIE, 2014) shows the increase in the number of students from Saudi Arabia since the early 2000s.
Table 4

*Saudi Student Enrollment in the United States*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of Students From Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>% Change from Previous Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>53,919</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>44,566</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>34,139</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>22,704</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>15,810</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>12,661</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>9,873</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>7,886</td>
<td>128.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
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<td>2004/05</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>5,579</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>5,273</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pavan (2013) suggested that the scholarship and the resulting number of students will build and has built what she calls a “Saudi Arabian knowledge society” (p. 25). The benefits that the nation of Saudi Arabia stands to gain are mutually exclusive to the financial rewards of Western institutions and countries who partner with the program (Lindsey, 2011). Using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, the 2014 Open Doors report showed that students from Saudi Arabia contributed a substantial 1.3 billion dollars to the U.S. economy. Although the institutions that they attend readily accept them, students from Saudi Arabia face a number of challenges upon arrival to the United States and throughout their educational career in the West, primarily because of the nature of the culture from which they hail.

**Saudi Arabian Culture**

To understand Saudi Arabia, one must first have a fundamental understanding of Islam. The foundation of Saudi Arabia, its customs and mores, and its people is Islam.
Islam is first embedded in the geography of the country itself; Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities in Islam, are located in Saudi Arabia. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Muslims complete a pilgrimage, or *Hajj*, to Mecca to fulfill one of the five conditions, or pillars, of Islam (Pharaon, 2004). The other four ritualistic pillars include *Shahada* (recognition a singular God with Mohammed as His prophet), *Salat* (prayer five times per day facing toward Mecca), *Zakat* (the giving of alms to the poor), and *Sawm* (fasting during the holy month of Ramadan) (Pharaon, 2004). To be a practicing Muslim, one must adhere to these five pillars. They play an integral role in the lives of students from Saudi Arabia and other students of the Muslim faith. The people of Saudi Arabia and of the Muslim faith are separated into two sects: Sunni and Shiite. The vast majority of Saudi Arabia is Sunni, and Shiites represent a cultural minority (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). This division is indicative of other divisions that historically existed within the country itself.

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country and relatively new to the scene of wealthy countries (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). As a monarchy, Saudi Arabian government power and much of the country’s wealth is centralized with a King as the leader of its 13 provinces. The widely beloved King Abdullah, who started the KASP, died in early 2015, and King Salman ascended to the throne. Notably, King Salman has upheld the KASP for both current and future students who are studying or will study abroad. The country’s wealth is due largely in part to oil. As Pharaon (2004) observed, “From a poor nation of Bedouins [nomadic desert tribesmen], fragmented into scattered tribes, and whose only source of foreign income came from pilgrims to the holy cities, Saudi Arabia is today a rich and modern nation, with all the amenities of
wealth and affluence” (p. 350). This oil-driven wealth, however, is a concern for many within Saudi Arabia who are considering survival after the age of fossil fuel dependency.

Perhaps looking ahead to a time without oil, King Abdullah developed the KASP. Two of the stated goals of the KASP are to “exchange scientific, educational and cultural experience with countries worldwide” and to “build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment” (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Along with sending its sons and daughters abroad, the educational system in Saudi Arabia has experienced much reform in the last fifty years.

**Education in Saudi Arabia.** Of its roughly 27 million citizens, 87 percent are considered literate (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). At 91 and 82 percent literate respectively, more men than women are literate. As one of the focuses in Islam, education is paramount to citizens of Saudi Arabia; however, these figures represent a society for whom education is important but perhaps not quite equal. Boys and girls are separated by gender in most schools beginning in the first grade (Hamdan, 2015). Because female students must be taught by female instructors, schools in Saudi Arabia often struggle to find enough female teachers to go around. This has led, in some cases, to men teaching females through a closed-circuit TV (wherein the students can see and hear the teacher, but the teacher can only hear the women), which arguably hinders interactions (Hamdan, 2015).

Despite these challenging situations, more women are represented in the student population than men (Pavan, 2013). In 2009 alone, four new universities opened in Saudi Arabia, and between the years 1970 and 2009 the number of universities in Saudi
Arabia grew from three to 24 (Pavan, 2013). A further focus on online and distance learning has led for many innovations to stem from Saudi Arabia (Al-Harthi, 2005; Hamdan, 2014); however, much of teaching still focuses on rote memorization and teacher-centered experiences (Hamdan, 2006). Further, there are some who believe that much of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia does more to further rather than change traditional views of gender and gender norms (Pharaon, 2004).

**Gender politics in Saudi Arabia.** Nearly the entirety of day-to-day living in Saudi Arabia is conducted with as much separation between men and women. The wearing of *niqab* allows for women to interact with men without exposing any of themselves except the eyes. Restaurants and shopping centers have men’s areas and family areas, family being a euphemism for women and children (Le Renard, 2008). As previously mentioned, boys and girls are separated from an early age in education and even more so after puberty. These separate spheres were ostensibly created to protect women from men who are not their family members; however, some believe these spheres do more to harm than protect (Le Renard, 2008). Hamdan (2006) opined, “In Islam, men and women have the same religious, moral duties, and responsibilities. Yet, I argue that cultural traditions governing Arab Muslim societies subordinate women” (p. 59).

The cultural traditions that separate women from men are said to have come from the teachings of Islam; however, Pharaon (2004) contended that the holy book of Islam, the Qu’ran, established men and women as having the same status. In actuality, men are considered the head of the family, have greater amounts of political power, and enjoy more relative freedoms, including driving (Lindsey, 2012). Although Saudi women
represent nearly 60 percent of those accessing higher education in Saudi Arabia and abroad, the upper echelon of higher education administration is dominated by men (Lindsey, 2012). The limitations of a perceived separate but equal society go beyond attempting to achieve equality between two separate spheres (Pharaon, 2004).

Those who come from Saudi Arabia to the United States or other Western societies to study experience a world that is completely unlike their own. The shock of going from a separate society to a mixed society ranges from simple surprise with little adjustment needed to real fear, especially on the part of women. Alhazmi (2010) likens being in a mixed gender environment to being under threat as a woman. He explained, “This is possibly a result of how Saudi female is enculturated to perceive members of the opposite sex who are not relations…[G]irls are brought up with ‘intimidation’ and ‘warning’ about boys and mixing with them” (p. 7). This fear at best creates a need for adjustment on the Saudi students’ part and at worst could be a barrier to their academic success.

**Needs of Students from Saudi Arabia**

Because students from Saudi Arabia hail from a tradition-rich culture that relies on elders, familial bonds, and patriarchy, they tend to bond with each other when in a new place rather than with their new environment (Brislin, 1981). Andrade (2006) spoke to this phenomenon, calling it a “ghettoization” of international students (p. 212). In strengthening the bonds between themselves and their countrymen and women, they alienate themselves from the communities in which they reside while studying abroad (Sherry et al., 2010). Further, the tendency to cling to each other while studying abroad may only bulwark the very culture that works against their integration (Hall, 2013).
Long before the KASP was in existence, Jammaz (1972) studied students from Saudi Arabia who were studying in the United States in 1971-1972. A student’s satisfaction and academic success, Jammaz found, was based on marital status, age, size of college attended, and major. Students attending smaller institutions, where hands-on learning and closer bonds with academic and support staff are more readily available, reported greater happiness and success than students from Saudi Arabia who were studying at larger institutions. Like Zimmerman’s (2009) study, Jammaz’s discovered that more frequent interactions with domestic students impacted student satisfaction; however, in Jammaz’s study, Saudi students reported that friendships with American students were more difficult to develop. In fact, maintaining only casual contact with domestic students led to a decrease in the satisfaction of students from Saudi Arabia. Self-consciousness and language barriers both played a role in the lacking of the creation of both platonic and romantic relationships for Saudi students seeking engagement with American students.

Over two decades succeeding Jammaz’s (1972) study, Al-Jasir (1993) concluded counter findings to Jammaz. Studying 218 students from Saudi Arabia, Al-Jasir found that in general the students were satisfied with their cultural, academic, and social experience in the United States, even going so far as to say they had grown personally from their experience. It is important to note, however, that Al-Jasir found that the Saudi students reported nearly no change to their personal values after studying in the U.S. Like Jammaz, the students in Al-Jasir’s study reported a limited amount of interaction with American students. A final finding of Al-Jasir’s study was that there is a negative correlation between perceived personal growth and time spent in the United
States. This could be explained, Al-Jasir contends, by deep homesickness and feelings of detachment from their home culture.

**Female Students from Saudi Arabia**

Although the state of gender politics in Saudi Arabia is shifting, women still find themselves with few inroads to power. Pharaon (2004) observed, “Women are perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers, and gender segregation is customary. To earn status, women must marry and reproduce” (p. 361). The impact of the gender segregation and gender politics on women’s educational choices is undeniable. The very money that allows for many women to study abroad in the West is the money that is propagating the separation of the sexes in Saudi Arabia (Le Renard, 2008). As Le Renard (2008) pointed out, the spatial separation of men and women create spheres of womanhood wherein women of greater social status experience more mobility than those of lesser means. The power, however, is in name only, as women of even the highest social status are considered less powerful than men. Although more women are pursuing higher education (Islam, 2014), those who do so in the West may risk subverting the social and religious codes to which they are held.

Perhaps the most conspicuous of these social and religious codes is the *hijab*. Read and Bartkowski (2000) interviewed veiled and unveiled Muslim women and found that women construct their choice to veil based both on religious and gender identities. Important to this research is the researchers’ finding that the environment and resources that surround women enable or disable them to veil. In other words, the researchers argued that because women in their study resided in a culturally diverse city—Austin, Texas—their choices were not dictated by the political or economic climate.
Complimentary to Read and Bartkowski’s research was Tawfig and Ogle’s (2013). They interviewed 15 women from Saudi Arabia on the subject of private sphere dress. The premise for their study was that because Saudi women spend the majority of their public sphere lives in hijab, abaya (a long dress-like garment that covers the body and arms), or burqah/niqab (a one- or two-piece garment covering everything but the eyes), more emphasis is placed on private sphere dress. The authors discovered three themes from their interviews. First, that the private sphere dress allowed women to conceptualize their desired selves. In other words, the women felt their private sphere dress represented what was closer to their true selves than their public sphere presentation. A second theme was that by appropriating Western, yet modern, styles, the women were mobilizing their desired selves. Finally, the private sphere dress also enabled their “looking glass” selves; it created the image that the women felt they wanted to project. This research is integral to researching women who study in the West. If women from Saudi Arabia are creating a bifurcated self based on two spheres, then knowing which self integrates into Western society—and how that self changes—will impact the level of social integration.

The hijab is a conspicuous symbol of the Other in the West (Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2014; Said, 1979). For some, the wearing of hijab can negatively affect aspects of their lives. Pasha-Zaidi et al. (2014) discovered that wearing a hijab in the United States lowered an applicant’s chance at receiving a job offer. In an educational sphere, veiling takes on a more nuanced symbolism. Cole and Ahmadi (2003) interviewed seven women who veiled about their perspectives and experiences on a large college campus in the Midwest. Six themes emerged from their interviews. First, the women in the
study associated veiling with being a good Muslim—the practice being inextricable from their religion. Beyond just being a Muslim, the hijab helped the women construct a Muslim identity, a second theme. Relevant to this study, the women expressed collective perceptions of how they were viewed on campus as women who veiled. Running the gamut from exoticism to fundamentalism, perspectives on veiling were felt and experienced by the women in the study. Also relevant to this study was the theme of social separation. The veil allowed for hierarchical distinctions to be drawn between those who veil (unenlightened) and those who do not (enlightened). The final two themes emerged when some women in the study chose to remove their veils in the public sphere, creating the themes of modesty without the veil and religious conviction. What Cole and Ahmadi’s (2003) study showed is a connection between the physicality and conspicuousness of veiling and dress and social integration.

Coming from a society steeped in societal rules, mores, and traditions, adjusting to life in the West can be challenging for women of Arab-Muslim origin. McDermott-Levy (2010) interviewed Arab-Muslim nursing students who were studying in the United States about their experiences living and studying abroad. Using phenomenological inquiry, McDermott-Levy described the experiences of 12 Omani nursing students and found that they faced certain challenges to their social and academic integration. The women reported challenges stemming from a lack of structural and environmental support for religious practices (like prayers and foot washing), which directly impacted their ability to maintain and mitigate stress and discrimination. McDermott-Levy concluded that facilitating religious needs could, by extension, facilitate adaptation. The women in the study also expressed a desire to
engage in discussion with Americans in order to gain new perspectives and assist in their academic facilitation. Important implications on English proficiency versus the ability to academically integrate in an American classroom were also discussed. McDermott-Levy found that the women in the study had to adjust to the teaching strategies that were quite different than previous educational experiences, which hindered their learning in the beginning. Additional challenges discovered stemmed from a separation from the familial culture to which Omani women are accustomed. Finally, the women in the study expressed a positive reaction to the opportunity for personal freedom living in the United States afforded them. Although they may not have taken advantage of social engagement opportunities that were presented to them, the mere presence of the opportunity, in a sense, liberated the participants.

Most recent and connected to this current study, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) conducted a qualitative study of the adjustment experiences of women from Saudi Arabia who were studying at various universities in the United States. In their grounded theory study, they found that women from Saudi Arabia experienced a dissonance between their perceptions and realities of the United States. Additionally, they discovered that women from Saudi Arabia experienced heightened acculturative stress when navigating language barriers and heterogeneous gendered situations; however, some acculturative stress was ameliorated by the presence of family. Finally, the researchers discovered their participants had noticed a change in themselves after spending time in the United States, including experiencing independence and freedom.

Although researchers have explored the educational phenomenon that the KASP has created in the United States, few have delved into sub-groups from within the
Saudis. Lefdhall-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) noted this lack of research: “Female students [from Saudi Arabia] have been largely absent or underrepresented in past research, whereas male Saudi international students have been both scholars of…and participants in several studies in the last few decades” (p. 2). In part, because Saudi women did not study at United States universities until recently, researchers may not have had reason to explore their needs. Those who have researched the unique population of women from Saudi Arabia have focused more on the more conspicuous aspects of their representations and not their academic persistence. Further, by separating women from Saudi Arabia from other Gulf Arab or Muslim female populations, specific social and academic integration challenges can be identified.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps because women from Saudi Arabia represent a small number of international students, few studies have been conducted that focus on their unique educational needs; however, it is because of their unique needs and backgrounds that more research is needed in the area of what succeeding in college means to them, which will enable universities to serve them better. Until now and to this researcher’s knowledge, no qualitative study of the academic persistence of female students from Saudi Arabia has been conducted. In order to test Tinto’s theory for this particular population, for this research the narratives of female students from Saudi Arabia who are in good academic standing at or who have graduated from an American university will be analyzed syntagmatically.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The prolific amounts of research and literature on both persistence and international students, respectively, that precede this study do not cross paths with each other. The few instances of the intersection of persistence and international students that exist contain proclamations decrying the lack of research in this area. More specifically, regardless of the influx of students from Saudi Arabia arriving to American campuses each year, there remains a gap in literature with regards to their experiences. From within this specific population with unique needs, a subgroup divided by gender exists. Women who come to the United States from Saudi Arabia to pursue education represent a population of students with unique and, in many cases, entirely unfamiliar needs. Because universities are seeing more students from Saudi Arabia, it is imperative that the students’ needs and pathways to success are explored in order to find ways to retain them. This study explores the experiences of women from Saudi Arabia with regards to their persistence through a narrative inquiry design. Using syntagmatic analysis, the salutogenic factors and moments of epiphany found either from within or external to Tinto’s (1997) model of student persistence were analyzed.

This chapter outlines the research methods used in this study, the design of the research, a description of the population along with an account on how the sample was chosen, instrumentation, procedures for both data collection and analysis, and a discussion of ethical considerations and limitations of the methodology.
Research Design

In this study, narrative inquiry was used to explore academic persistence for female students from Saudi Arabia who were currently studying at or who have graduated from a regional, four-year public university in the mid-South as an undergraduate student. Qualitative research often utilizes interviews as a way to gather information as seen through the perceptions and truths of interviewees (Creswell, 2009). Interviews for this research were semi-structured (Patton, 2002). The initial interview schedule is in Appendix A. Data from the interviews were analyzed using syntagmatic analysis in order to test Tinto’s revised model of student attrition (Brooks, 2012).

Narrative Inquiry

The experiences of international students, especially those who are in an abject position, vary greatly from each other (Sherry et al., 2010). Marshall and Rossman (2011) contended that “narrative analysis seeks to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed as they construct…stories about their lives” (p. 22). Beyond the challenges of writing Likert-style questionnaires that may contain colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions, American references, and phrasing that might confuse a non-native speaker, survey research does not capture the fact that humans always have a story to tell that cannot be measured with a scale. Patton (2002) maintained that narrative inquiry “reveal[s] cultural and social patterns through the lens of individual experiences” (p. 115). Adding to that, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested that the use of narrative in educational research is fitting simply because “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Because we communicate using stories and have since the
beginning of humankind, narratives act as an inroad to exploring situations that are
unlike our own experiences (Gottschall, 2012). The stories of women from Saudi
Arabia may reveal specific courses of events that either engender or hinder their
educational persistence (Hamdan, 2006, 2009).

Narratives may also act as a way for abject populations to gain strength or power
(Hamdan, 2009). Smith (1999) contended that that research of Indigenous peoples
should have goals of self-determination and should actively pursue “decolonization,
transformation, healing, and mobilization” (p. 116). Although this research will be
conducted with international students on an American campus—arguably an indigenous
population—, this research will not be used as a decolonization tool. Kendall, Marshall,
and Barlow (2013) recently used narrative to explore health care with Indigenous
populations. The researchers attempted to eschew their own colonizing behaviors and
shed their Western ideologies in order to allow their subjects’ stories to gain strength.
Because the researcher applied Tinto’s (1997) model of student success, a decidedly
Western model, to the participants’ stories, some cross-cultural analysis and perhaps
even colonization occurred. Most significant to this study, Hamdan (2009) employed
narrative inquiry in her interviews with Arab Muslims who were living in Canada. She
maintained, “Narrative acts as a lens through which we see anew—it is a means to
explore unfamiliar sociohistorical context” (p. 1). If the narratives in this study provide
a lens through which the researcher can explore unfamiliar context, then inevitably a
returned gaze has occurred. The returned gaze is a decidedly Western one. In this
study, the participants’ Othered perspectives were presented. They spoke as citizens of
a society with its own hegemonic control. Western ideas of progression, completion,
and success that appear in Tinto’s model guided the analysis of the narratives.

**Role of the Researcher**

In this narrative inquiry, the researcher was responsible for the data collection (i.e. the interviews) and the analysis. As with any kind of data collection, interview-based research can be conflated with the interviewer’s own ideas and meaning making. Atkinson (2002) suggested embracing this co-creation of meaning in life story interviews, wherein the interviewer guides the interviewee in building his or her life story. Kendall et al. (2013) urged creating a distinction between research that is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant and research that engenders themed and re-constructed stories. The researcher’s role in this research was to present the stories and experiences of women from Saudi Arabia who have had the singular experience of leaving their homes and succeeding academically in the United States.

The participants’ narratives were facilitated by the researcher. Denzin (1989) maintained that told stories of ourselves are “grounded in a group’s culture where criteria of truthfulness are established” (p. 77). To find truth from within the culture of the women who will be interviewed, the researcher would have to appropriate their culture and language (arguably these two can be interpreted as one in the same) as her own. Because this is not a possibility, the stories were presented as the women’s truths. Denzin (1989) also put forth the following tenant of biographical stories: “A story that is told is never the same story that is heard” (p. 72). The women in this research told their stories as women from Saudi Arabia who have been living in the United States for varying lengths of time and who have immersed themselves in the culture at varying degrees. In turn, the researcher listened as a Caucasian American woman who was born
in the Midwest. These experiences are scarcely related, and the dissonance that is created by this fact will be embraced.

The researcher also recognized several pragmatic truths about herself that could have influenced the outcome and interpretation of this data. For the past six years, the researcher has worked at an English language school, first as a teacher and then as an administrator, immersed in the world of second language learning. The school has seen large numbers of students from Saudi Arabia. The students, especially the women, have sought the researcher’s knowledge and council. They have invited her to their homes and celebrations. A significant amount of knowledge of both Saudi culture and gendered politics from within Saudi culture has been gained because of these relationships.

Because of the researcher’s vast experiences within the international community, many of the participants had graduated from the school of which the researcher is an administrator. The participants in this study were no longer English language students; however, some of them had spent a significant amount of time under both the researcher’s tutelage and, frankly, power. Because the women in this study were no longer studying English, ostensibly they had no fear of retribution for not participating; however, because the researcher had once held a position of power over the students, they most likely held a level of respect for her and a desire to please her. Additionally, some of the participants had family members who could potentially enroll in the language school she led, which would affected the onus of participation.

Additional to the researcher’s position in the English language school, at the time of this study the researcher was also an instructor where the students in the study were
currently pursuing or had pursued their degrees. The researcher is aware of the university’s mission to internationalize the campus and has been immersed in both the education and welcoming of international students to the campus. The researcher had taught students from Saudi Arabia while they were seeking their undergraduate degrees and may teach them in the future. Because of this, the researcher had developed both ideas about international students in mainstreamed American university classes that were based on experience and opinions about the way in which internationalization is carried out at this institution.

Experiences cannot—and arguably should not—be separated from scholarship. Eschewing the negative connotation of the term bias, the researcher used her knowledge and understanding of both Saudi culture and persistence of international students to present the results of these interviews in their purest forms. In this study, the stories and experiences of the women were stewarded, and the data were analyzed through a lens of persistence and academic success along with a body of knowledge that had come before any academic pursuits had begun. This approach only strengthened the results.

**Population and Sample**

For this research, female students from Saudi Arabia who are currently enrolled in or who have graduated from a regional, four-year public university in the mid-south of the United States were interviewed. An initial list of women from Saudi Arabia—already known to the researcher—was developed. This initial list was representative of the population, including a mixture of married and single women, women who are here individually or as sisters or wives, and women who have children and do not have children. The initial list of women contained eight names. The remainder of the sample,
yielded from a population of women from Saudi Arabia who are studying in the United States, was created using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), snowball, or chain, sampling is a way to gain “information-rich key informants or critical cases” (p. 237). Coming from a high-context culture, students from Saudi Arabia tend to engage in information exchange through informal channels rather than formal channels (Hall, 1976). Utilizing these informal channels to gain participants yielded a richer sample of students. Further, because the population of women from Saudi Arabia who are attending or have attended this institution is relatively small and close-knit, more participants were attracted through informal chains of communication. From the initial list of eight, two declined to participate and two participants suggested a total of five women, all of whom agreed to participate.

The goal for the sample size was 8 to 12 women from Saudi Arabia who are successfully progressing toward or have completed a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, or both in the United States. Seidman (2013) recommended two criteria for determining sample size. First, he urged researchers to consider sufficiency of participants in order to capture ranges of experience. He then discussed saturation of information. This, he contended, is “a point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new” (p. 58). As the participants are interviewed, reoccurring themes and patterns will be noted as they fit into or deviate from Tinto’s (1997) model of student persistence. The sample size might have grown or shrunk as the interviews were conducted; however, the eleven participants yielded information that was nuanced and rich.
Table 5

*Participant List*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children?</th>
<th>Family in U.S.?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nawal</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Dental Hygiene</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nada</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Public Heath</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Medical Technology</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manar</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadira</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahlam</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Medical Technology</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja</td>
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<td>Medical Technology</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zain</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Pre-Dentistry</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rayan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Medical Technology</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names are pseudonyms*

The sample was delimited in two primary ways. First, women who have earned bachelor’s degrees from Saudi universities (or universities from other non-Western countries) were not be included. Although meaningful, these conferred degrees may have been earned without the need to academically or socially integrate, as university study in Saudi Arabia is constructed from a distinct cultural perspective (Pavan, 2013). Additionally, women who were currently studying in an English language program in the United States were not included. Beyond the barriers to communication this might create, the researcher’s current career position might have interfered with the legitimacy of the data. Further, although Tinto’s (1997) model could be applied to an intensive English language program (IEP), the original design was put forth to encompass experiences at the university level. Women, however, were not eliminated based on
how their English language was accepted at the university. In other words, women who gained admission through either a standardized test, the on-campus IEP, or an off-campus IEP were considered in the sample. Additionally, women who had transferred from one American institution to this one were included. Experiences at another university may not align with experiences at the university in this study; however, epiphanies, challenges, and triumphs occurring at other universities were noted in the data.

In choosing to study the experiences of women from Saudi Arabia, the researcher chose to study a group that is thrice marginalized. First, the participants were marginalized because they were a part of international students on an American university campus. Second, they were a minority within their own sub-group of students—by far more men from Saudi Arabia were studying in the United States at the time of this study than women. Finally, they represented a religious group that in the United States has fewer followers than other religions. The experiences of these women as told through narratives represented this trifecta of relegation.

**Research Questions**

In developing research questions for this study, both Tinto’s (1997) model of student persistence and narrative inquiry as a whole were considered. For Tinto, focusing on both integration and the goals of the student and institution can lead to persistence (1997). In narrative inquiry, researchers focus on life stories to gain meaning and explain phenomena (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The following three research questions were designed to allow for data to emerge from the interviews on how women from Saudi Arabia successfully pursue academia in the United States.
RQ1: How (or to what degree) are female students from Saudi Arabia socially and academically integrating into their institutions?

RQ2: What perceptions do female students from Saudi Arabia have of personal and institutional goals surrounding their success?

RQ3: How do female students from Saudi Arabia academically persist at American universities?

**Instrument Development**

In conducting narrative inquiry research, the interview becomes a conduit for what Riessman (2002) described as a relational process of narrative building. She maintained, “[Storytelling] is a collaborative practice that requires attentive listening and questioning” (p. 368). She went on to describe the researcher as sharing the space created by the interviewee. With these observations in mind, an interview protocol that will attempt to capture experience and story was developed.

**Interview**

Although interviews are used in any number of research settings, literature about how to develop, revise, and conduct interviews varies from prescriptive and narrow to descriptive and varying (Platt, 2002). Atkinson (2002) discussed the tension between the opposing perspectives, framing it using life story interviews: “In my view, the life story interview can be approached scientifically, but it is best carried out as an art” (p. 120). Interviews as a tool for research are also challenging because of the intimacy that is created throughout the process (Gemignani, 2014). The interview as process, however, is as much a part of the research as the participants themselves.

For this research, a three-part interview process was employed. Seidman (2013)
recommended a three-interview series for conducting phenomenological interviewing that can be applied in this research context. The first interview consists of a focused life history in order to contextualize the participant’s experience in context of her life. For this research, a focused life history was defined as the participant’s life as it pertained to the decision to study abroad and leading up to the persistence toward or completion of a degree in the United States. This may have included reconstructing meaningful moments in time, including questions that begin with “how” rather than “why” in order to create a full picture of the process. It was during this part of the interview that the researcher looked for what Denzin (1989) called “epiphanies,” of which there are four types: the major event that affects a person’s entire life, the representative event which signifies reactions to a lengthy period of time, the minor epiphany that can symbolize a major moment in a person’s life or relationships, and the re-lived epiphany which represents the nostalgic reenactment of moments (p. 71). From those epiphanies, the second interview was constructed, which involved the details of the lived experience of the participants (Seidman, 2013). The third interview focused on the meaning of the experiences, or “the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life” (Seidman, 2013, p. 22). The researcher developed the protocol, considered question type and data collection methods, and weighed the trustworthiness and ethical issues that might have arisen during the research based on the interview process laid out by Seidman.

Protocol development. Tinto’s (1997) revised model of student attrition offers a highly structured framework upon and around which to build the interview protocol. The majority of the questions covering the gamut of the model were covered in the first
round of interviews. Demographic information, including age, major, high school type, and relatives studying in the United States, was gathered using a one-page questionnaire. Information questions about family background (including parents’ educational levels and jobs, sibling experience, socioeconomic status, etc.), self-reported skills and abilities, and prior schooling were addressed in covering the pre-entry attributes. Although these questions will be fixed and pragmatic, the researcher anticipated narratives to emerge at any time (Riessman, 2002). The researcher predicted that for Saudi women, questions about family will have greater implications for the remainder of the interview than the other two pre-entry attributes. After pre-entry attributes were discussed, the women were asked about their goals, perceptions of institutional commitments and goals, intentions, and external commitments. Again, at this point in the interviews, a tension between Tinto’s model that focuses on individual pursuits and the collectivist Saudi culture might have surfaced. To address this, the remainder of the questions focused on the interplay between elements in Tinto’s model and the external commitments to which the women felt they must commit. For example, questions about how much time was invested in the academic system were balanced with questions about time spent involved in a social system. For Tinto, the locus of the social system is still the university itself. This might have been another point of tension between Saudi culture and the model. In addition to asking descriptive questions about their institutional experiences, the researcher also asked them to discuss their efforts and learning. Theoretically, these questions connected back to initial intention to both attend a university and persist.

**Question type.** The type of question that was used depended on what interview
was being conducted and what subject was being explored. For the first interview, the questions were mostly background/demographic, sequencing, and knowledge questions (Patton, 2002). Because the initial interview is to establish a baseline of experiences and to look for epiphanies, the protocol was semi-structured in nature but closer to structured than not. Since the researcher was the sole interviewer, little concern for too much variation from the initial interview guide was present; however, the researcher wanted to create the same opportunity for each participant to find meaningful moments in her past. The second interview was more than unstructured; it was reactionary to the responses of each participant. This means that the chance of each participant having a unique second interview was quite high. The third interview was a reflection and opportunity for the interviewee to make meaning of her experiences (Gemignani, 2014). For the latter two interviews, the question types were most likely feeling, values, and opinions questions in order to facilitate the meaning making (Patton, 2002).

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data for this study were collected via interviews, which, in this case, created challenges to the research. First, most of the participants had known the researcher before the study. The context in which they knew the researcher was as an educator and administrator of a language school and as an instructor at the university. A few participants had not had experiences with the researcher in either context but had known her for some time as friends and acquaintances. Two of the participants had not met the researcher prior to this research. The specific knowledge of the culture that the researcher had prior to conducting this study, however, is an advantage. As the researcher knew about the participants, they in turn knew about her. This mutual
knowledge created a high-context situation, which is important in Saudi culture (Pharaon, 2004). The challenge surrounding the power dynamic, however, may be unavoidable. In their interviews with nursing students from the UAE, Hawamdeh and Raigangar (2014) found a perceived power hierarchy between the interviewer and the interviewee to be a barrier to candid answers in interviews. Because of these aspects, the interviews were conducted away from the university campus. The researcher surmised the best place to conduct the interviews was in the women’s homes without their husbands or other male relatives present. This is true for a number of reasons. First, in Saudi culture, a woman’s chief domain is the home; there she is raised higher on the hierarchy (Pharaon, 2004). Second, hospitality culture of Saudis and other Gulf Arabs creates an open environment of sharing and trust (Hawamdeh & Raiganger, 2014). Finally, the combination of these two revelations meant that the researcher’s power positionality shifted, making interviewee in charge of telling her own story (Atkinson, 2002).

Along with the setting, the type of interviews—group or individual—were considered. In the researcher’s experience, Saudi women create tight, inextricable bonds with each other. From within those spheres, there are few secrets or pretense. That being said, the tension between the private and the public self is raised for Saudi women (Hawamdeh & Raiganger, 2014; Pharaon, 2004). In group interviews, Hawamdeh and Raiganger (2014) found women providing answers they perceived they were supposed to give rather than ones they were truly feeling. Because the women were at times asked to reveal negative, as well as positive, experiences, one-on-one interviews that were audio recorded only were best.
For the practical aspects of data collection, a group of Saudi women on campus were contacted through a letter of introduction developed within the IRB process. After responses were received, a time for the initial interview was established, the signing of the consent form was organized, and the interview was conducted. Directly after each interview, the participant’s academic transcript (with her permission) was accessed in order to establish background information and to which to compare the narrative data. The interviews were scheduled at times when privacy can be ensured and when time is ample.

During the interview, a secure, high-quality digital audio recorder was utilized. The raw tape was transferred to a secure, password-protected hard drive in anticipation of transcription. Additionally, epiphanies and meaningful moments throughout the interview were noted for later transcription notes. The initial interviews were anticipated to last from 60 to 90 minutes; the interviews ranged from 45 to 70 minutes in length. The follow-up interviews were based on the richness of the initial interviews and varied in length.

After each initial interview, two things occurred: a time for the second interview was scheduled and the participant was asked if she would recommend another woman for the study. This latter question was a part of the snowball sampling technique was utilized. The former question was integral to the completion of the three-part interview process (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, after each interview, the audio was given to a hired transcriber whom had been contracted for this study. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement and ensured all data were to be kept secure. The transcriptions were submitted to the researcher upon completion; wherein, they were
read while listening to the audio in order to ensure accuracy and make further notes.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

In this narrative inquiry, the data were analyzed through a narrative lens and were explored through the experiences of the participants in search of both epiphanies and challenges. The digressions of the narratives, which, according to Riessman (2002), can “provide contextual and associative cues and sometimes force us to confront the very assumptions of our research topics” (p. 367), were also analyzed. The researcher also took cues from what Riessman called “meaningful silences” (p. 369). In these silences, there were some options. For breaks in language, words might have been offered. This practice occurs frequently in interactions between non-native and native speakers of any language; however, the researcher was aware that by providing words, significance would have been provided. For breaks in conversation, prodding or clarification questions might have been asked. Again, doing so means the researcher would have become co-creator of the narrative (Gemignani, 2014). Finally, the silence could have been analyzed for its meaning. Throughout the interviews, the researcher made cognizant choices for analysis purposes.

Primarily, a syntagmatic analysis of the narratives created through this research was employed. According to Peradotto (1977), language—and by extension narrative and story—can be analyzed two ways: paradigmatically and syntagmatically. In paradigmatic situations, items or events do not occur simultaneously or even sequentially but rather in lieu of each other. In syntagmatic situations, items occur in sequential order, creating a causation chain that often leads to a result of some sort (Peradotto, 1977). In her narrative analysis, Brooks (2012) examined the narratives of
high-achieving African American students at predominantly white universities using syntagmatic analysis. From their narratives, Brooks identified key moments or choices in the sequence of their respective experiences that engendered or led to their success. For the purpose of this research, the narratives of the participants were analyzed using syntagmatic analysis in order to test their experiences against Tinto’s (1997) model of student retention.

This analysis occurred through a series of interactions with both the audio and the transcriptions of the interviews. The data were coded using themes based on Tinto’s model and on salutogenic factors. Data were coded using the NVivo 10 through the use of its text-based node capabilities. Once major themes emerged, meaningful passages that allowed for the narratives of success to be told in the women’s voices were be selected and used in the findings of this research.

**Ethical Considerations**

In conducting any kind of research, the results of the project are in the hands of the researcher. The onus to co-construct memory and experience with respect to the participant’s life is on the researcher (Gemignani, 2014). Atkinson (2002) noted, “Ultimately, the ethics of an interactional relationship involving a highly personal exchange make the life story interview a value-laden encounter” (p. 124). The author went on to note that all consent forms should include statements of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. This presents a problem when interviewing Gulf Arab participants. As Hawamdeh and Raiganger (2014) discovered, signing contracts or agreements in Arab culture “implies a lack of trust in his or her word” (p. 30). They suggested obtaining verbal consent, witnessed by a research assistant witness.
and a handout about the nature of the research. They also noted the difficulties this may pose with certain Institutional Research offices. For this reason, the researcher had no choice but to opt with a signed consent form, but the form was be partnered with a verbal explanation of why the form was being used, which was predicated on and maintained the trust the women already had in the researcher.

Additional pragmatic ethical considerations were present throughout the study. The researcher followed the advice of both her committee and the IRB representatives at the institution with regards to the ethics of this study. The researcher followed all relevant local, state, and federal laws. The researcher had completed the required training of the Human Subjects Review Board, as required by the Educational Leadership department of Western Kentucky University. The researcher also obtained approval from the Western Kentucky University Institutional Review Board in order to conduct this study. Electronic files containing the recordings of these interviews are being kept on a secure hard drive that is protected by a password to ensure participant confidentiality. The transcriber agreed to confidentiality and had no record of the files once the transcription were complete. The researcher followed all of the described processes and use of data description from the consent form.

**Summary**

This study explored the academic experiences of women from Saudi Arabia who are successfully progressing toward or have successfully completed a degree from an American university. In conducting a narrative inquiry, the researcher directed this study with an awareness of the methodological techniques, instrument design, data collection procedures and analysis, and ethical concerns. This narrative inquiry relied
on a review of the literature, participants’ academic transcripts, and a series of three, face-to-face interviews that ranged from structured to reactive with each interviewee. In conducting the research in this manner, the researcher was able to triangulate the analysis of the salutogenic factors that led to the women’s success.

The researcher’s role in this research was researcher, interviewer, and analyst, as well as a co-constructor of narrative. In taking on these roles, the researcher was aware of the potential for bias as a Western woman—a woman who has lived in a world of Western ideas of equality, fairness, and feminism—to interfere with both the data collection and analysis; however, as co-constructor of knowledge, the researcher identified these moments and built them into the analysis. Ultimately, the experiences of the women in study were presented as much in their own words as is possible within the confines of this research.

The narratives and experiences were sought through a series of three, face-to-face interviews (Seidman, 2013). The first one established a timeline of events as a focused life history through the use of structured questions. The second interview added details of the meaningful experiences that emerged from the first interview. The final interview reflected on the meaning created in the first two interviews. The women in the study fit the criteria for selection and were contacted either through an initial list of participants or through snowball sampling techniques.

The researcher conducted the analysis of the narratives syntagmatically as they were being conferred and afterward through the transcripts. Using qualitative data software, the data were coded for meaning and the responses were analyzed as they adhere to or deviate from Tinto’s (1997) model of student persistence.
In conducting this research, due effort to conform to the ethical standards dictated by the social sciences and by the Human Subjects Review Board were put forth. The researcher provided a thorough review of the study to all potential participants and, after briefing the participants, obtained full consent to participate through the use of a consent form. Efforts were made to secure written and audio data that result from this study, including audio recording, transcripts, academic transcripts, and notes, in order to maintain the anonymity of the subjects. Finally, the Institutional Review Board of Western Kentucky University was consulted and approved all aspects of this study.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

The small, but meaningful, influx of women from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States has arguably had an impact on those with whom they interact, on the system they are navigating, and, most importantly, on the women themselves. Entering the university via a qualifying score on a language test or after achieving success at a language school, the women of this study were, according to the university, mainstreamed students, ready to withstand the perils and triumphs of academia. However, according to Tinto and other retention theorists, the term “ready” or to be prepared is a relative concept. The readiness, or preparedness, of international students, including women from Saudi Arabia will continue to be a concern for American universities as long as internationalization continues to be a primary goal.

This chapter outlines the findings of the study and organizes the findings based on ways in which the data adhere to or deviate from Tinto’s revised model of student persistence (1997). Each section includes examples from interviews to illuminate how women from Saudi Arabia fit into or shatter Tinto’s model. The chapter also makes references to the syntagmatic analyses conducted on each participant’s story (Appendix D). The chapter seeks to elaborate on the stated research questions of this study, which are as follows:

RQ1: How (or to what degree) are female students from Saudi Arabia socially and academically integrating into their institutions?

RQ2: What perceptions do female students from Saudi Arabia have of personal
and institutional goals surrounding their success?

RQ3: How do female students from Saudi Arabia academically persist at American universities?

The findings of this study as presented in this chapter and how they connect to the research questions will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The participants of this study speak English as a second language and, therefore, at times commit grammatical and/or syntactical errors. The researcher has made every effort to preserve the original language of the women in this study. All direct quotations are presented as they were spoken to the researcher. In the few cases wherein clarification is needed, the researcher has provided context or clarity in subject or meaning.

**Findings**

**Pre-Entry Attributes**

For many of the women interviewed, their lives prior to coming to the United States seemed simple and straightforward. For those living in small towns, life was idyllic. Qadira described her town as one made up entirely of family:

You know I am living in the small town. It just my parents, my cousin…we all of them. I know them, they know me, and they know my parents…I can go anytime, like in the middle of the night…It's very safe because it's all of them I know them.

Others, like Manar who lived in Jubail, a large industrial city in eastern Saudi Arabia, came from more cosmopolitan environments:

I met a lot of people. I met people from Syria, people from Lebanon, from
Sudan, even one from England. There's a lot of people, so I knew this global idea. I wanted more. I want to go out. I want to see. I want to understand what those people have. I can go through the same thing that they went through and get this broad spectrum—the whole crazy ideas that they have and all the experiences, and all this stuff I want to learn.

The two women showcased above represent two ends of the broad spectrum of the participants of this study. Arguably, their pre-entry characteristics may typify the range of students from all countries, including Saudi Arabia. More specifically, the schooling, personal skills and attributes, and family backgrounds of each of the participants laid the foundation for their success.

**Prior schooling.** The participants of this study showed acute awareness of the impact of prior schooling on their education in the United States. Beginning with the pedagogical and methodological differences between teachers in Saudi Arabia and teachers in the United States, Nawal outlined her experiences:

Back home there's not a lot of critical thinking. You learn the subject. You memorize the subject you put it on paper. Like you can memorize it word to word and put it in your exam and you will be fine. But here you have plagiarism, you need to think critically, you need to write your opinion. It did not matter what your opinion is back home. Nobody ask you so like what do you think of this? That question was never asked.

When given a scenario where a question needing an opinion-based answer might have been asked, Nawal replied:

See if you're not used to being asked what you think; you don't even think about
it. So it's just okay you're gonna build it there, build it there. But now [that I’m in the United States] it's like you think about it and that's the only thing you think that…no I don't want…I don't think that's right. And you speak up. And I think that…not just me…I've noticed this in every person I know who went to school in the States that they take that with them back home. And they speak their mind and they say what they think whether it's with their family or with anybody else.

Like Nawal, Ahlam experienced similarly straightforward instruction:

We didn’t do a lot of assignments. It’s just related to the books and what’s in the books like assigned inside the books but nothing like projects or essays anything like that. So, we didn’t do…when I came here it was so hard to adjust comparing to high school in there because we didn’t do anything outside the book.

Zain also found most of her high school education to be book-based to the point of plagiarism from an American point of view: “The way it works back home like we take the lesson and we go back home and just, you know, do the exercise over the thing we already covered.” When asked what would happen if she answered on a test what was word-for-word from the text, Zain replied,

This is what I’m supposed to do because…like you know I’m not supposed to cheat…but this is what I’m supposed to write because…the way it works back home is like she [the teacher] will just take the question like straight from the book and she will just ask us, like mention…synthesis. Just that and we will write the definition for that word exactly the same way we had it in the book, so it's not cheating.
Education through memorization and recitation was a recurring theme in the interviews as the women reflected on their prior education. Sara, with pride, remembered memorizing the Koran and could still recite passages from memory:

In general, we have to….memorize, of course, and then do…paper work but really it’s simple, I guess, not like university…memorize, memorize because especially with religion studies you need to know all these rules. How you gonna live your life without knowing then, so you need to remember them.

The level to which the participants were asked to produce learning and the results of that learning depended primarily on whether a student attends public or private school in Saudi Arabia. Layla elaborated on the differences:

The difference between like public and private school in my country is like when you want to have a grades you go to private school; when you want to learn, you go to a public school… [The teachers at private schools] kind of give [students] the questions, like the exam, as a review and [students] just like study from it…All the exams like [teachers] provide it to [students]. A lot of fun there like sports and music lessons…When the person is not good in studying, like is not an excellent person, you can go there. I think the purpose of going there is to get the grades not to learn. So like it's not fair when you go to the university and you go to a good major because like if your grade is high, but you are not learn anything like you're from private school.

All of the participants attended public high schools of varying sizes in Saudi Arabia for at least part of their education. Nada attended private school after attending public school: “I just transfer to a private school, just for last year in order to increase my
GPA.” Manar also transferred to a private school; however, her reasoning was connected to her mother being a teacher at her school. She recalled, “I told my mom I can’t live like this, so I want to go to a private school where they can treat me like everyone else.”

Whether attending a public or private school, the women participated in an educational system that consisted primarily of females. Layla described being able to take off her hijab during her first year of college because all classmates and face-to-face teachers were female, and because a wall cordoned off the women from the outside world. Sara showed preference to this world:

In our education system it is all separate. Man from woman, so it's really like I have more freedom in my country. I can say that. It's just for you, so you can take your abaya off, hijab off…it's all woman. You just be comfortable. You just run play you have all day without man interacting. When you have like here it's make you have to wear this all the time. It's just so much time I have to be covered.

The preference for a homosocial learning experience made the transition from an all-female learning environment to a heterogenous environment challenging. Putting it succinctly, Nawal said, “Having boys in the class…It's like it makes me...in the beginning, it makes me cautious and shy.” Unlike the others, Nana came to the United States having been in a class with men while studying in Bahrain: “When I was study in Bahrain and my age 16 with the math…no women in the class.” With the exception of Nana, the women had to adjust to learning beside men in class, which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.
In all cases, the women attended high schools in Saudi Arabia that were led and run by female administrators and teachers. Those who attended university, like Nana, had varying experiences. Nawal described living in a dorm of all women who “were not allowed to go outside.” Women went from the dorms to the class and from class to the dorms. Weekend excursions home were planned and mandatory. Only a male guardian could sign a woman out for an unplanned jaunt. Although the system of dorm life was decidedly stricter than most U.S. universities, some who attended college in Saudi Arabia experienced different teaching taught by a different kind of teacher. Layla experienced two male teachers through a live-stream television, where, as she described, the women could see and hear the teacher and the teacher could hear them. When asked how she felt about the experience, she replied, “Actually I didn't like because I don't feel like paying attention. Like he's not seeing me, so I can do whatever I want, so I didn't like it.” Like having male classmates, being taught by a man was something to which the women had to adjust in coming to the United States.

Having an all-female cadre of teachers and all-female classmates, however, did nothing to alleviate the conduct and deportment standards to which they were held. Manar remembered,

The schools or the teachers or even the principal would tell you have to just be a good girl and you have to wear your clothes properly and you have to get married and get a degree and just work and have kids. It ends there. There’s nothing behind the whole circles that they draw for you.

She went on to describe a strict system of dress codes and color limitations on clothes. Inside the classroom and the system of learning, Layla recalled a strict classroom
environment: “In my country at the university we are not allowed to…to communicate with the teacher like comfortably. For example, my grade is wrong and there is something with it, I am not allowed to go and ask why this is wrong. And, I’m not allowed to give a joke. I mean the class is like stressful whatever it is. Even if like it’s a fun class, it is still stressful.” Independently, Rayan agreed with Layla, “The teachers [in the U.S.] act normally, so the teacher doesn’t have that prestige….Our teachers are more serious; we respect them a lot.” She quickly added, “I like how the teachers act here.”

Skills and attributes. Women from Saudi Arabia are socialized to not only be in certain places and dress in certain ways but also to behave in certain ways. Nawal explained,

In our culture, woman has to be shy. It’s…you need to be shy. It’s not a quality you have. You need to be shy. So, you don’t ask questions, you don’t give up your opinion…but I feel with a lot of students coming to the States, a lot of us cannot hold our tongue anymore and it gets us in a lot of trouble, but we can’t…we can’t do it anymore.

The women, including Nawal, revealed, however, skills and attributes antithetical to Nawal’s assessment of women from Saudi Arabia. Separately, Zain concurred with these conclusions:

I always have that idea in my head and that sound like men, men, men…women can't do it, and I hear that come from everyone around even from my brothers. They were not trying to say you will be failure or something, but it's gonna be really hard, and you have to think about it seriously, but I was like no. I have
seen it in my life a lot of women succeed then they did better than men, so if they did it, I can.

Nawal herself displayed her sense of agency and independence in taking control of her education on two occasions. After negotiating with her father, she was able to conduct an internship near her hometown and live alone after spending a year in the controlling confines of her all-female dorm. The negotiation continued when her brother—her male escort to the United States—failed his visa interview, which meant she would not be able to study in the U.S. according to the KASP:

I went to my parent's room, and I stole my passports—American and Saudi—and I made sure that I have my permission to the leave the country signed by my dad and my ticket in my room. Because I knew that my uncles were involved in this and one of them was very, very traditional, and he had a talk with me because I locked myself in my room and was like I'm...this is not gonna happen. I'm going regardless if you approve it or not. I remember his talk, and I was crying like [he said] you can't go without a male companion. And that when I just exploded I guess and was like I'm going it's not my fault that [my brother] does not care about his education. All the hard work I did was for me, not for him and not for you to say that I'm not gonna do it.

Nawal’s display of manifest destiny represented the most extreme sense of personal control over one’s future; however, other women saw themselves succeeding in the present and the future.

Manar remembered the moment she knew she was going to do something different:
I kind of told my father that I wanted to do something else other than just stay back in Saudi Arabia and study like everyone else. I kind of saw a future for myself since I was in the 11th grade, I guess. I told my father that I had this crazy idea about traveling to America and studying there.

Zain’s memories went back even further: “When I was like almost five years old, and I wanted to start reading, to start learning to read…I started learning, you know, face parts like nose and all of those words [in English], and I was so cute when I was little.” Both Manar and Zain attended extracurricular English language schools to improve their language. Most of the women watched American television prior to coming to the States as a way to improve their English.

Outside of seeking English prior to arriving in the United States, Nada and Nana both worked in the medical field, which enabled them to practice English and inspired them to work hard. Nana recalled using a computer system in English and being inspired by her coworkers:

They affect my how I challenge myself because they are coming to another city and they are not knowing anything about Arabic. They learn step-by-step…It’s difficult all people to learn, and I see people that it’s encourage me to learn English. I should be better [than other] people.

Nada, who had studied in English while attending SGNA (Saudi German Institute for Nursing and Allied Health), used the language she learned and interacted with other nurses in English at work.

Without exception, all participants described themselves as good students. Sara, who married her fiancé of two years two days after graduating, remembered, “I was
really good. I had really good grade. From 100, I get 98.” Ahlam described working on her GPA: “In high school I was studying most of the time because…I needed the GPA…a good GPA to pass…If I had free time, I watch TV…but never…outside activity for me especially.” Qadira remembered her high school results: “In high school my average, my total average was 94.” Women engaging in academic success in Saudi Arabia, Qadira explained, is more common than men: “In my country…[men] didn’t just finish the high school…the men don’t complete…but the women, she always like to complete.”

Family background. By far the most significant pre-entry attribute of the women were their families. Long after specific questions about family were posed in interviews, the participants referred to their families and specific family members as points of inspiration, encouragement, support, and strength. Nawal contended that family played a significant role in her education:

From Kindergarten until now my parents, my mom, help me. Like she would study with me even though she didn’t finish high school. She would teach me stuff I didn’t understand until high school. Then my dad turn. Well, he taught me math actually during this time. And now it’s still like my mom always encourages me…’you can do this. Do you need me to wake you up in the morning?’ Even though she in a different country, but she still does it.

Nawal’s example was not unique to her; nearly every step in the participants’ education can be traced to a family member’s or members’ influence.

The role of family begins with how much time the women spent with extended family while growing up. Sara remembered gathering at her grandmother’s house every
weekend:

We gather in that house…my grandma maybe had about 60 grandchildren, so it would be all there, and some the grandchildren have grandchildren too like some of her like she saw her grand-grandchildren, and if we gather maybe around 100 person you know man [and] woman…We have to like you know go every weekend you know to check on my grandma, see her every week and of course play with my cousin like the ones that we grow up with…do all of adventures and share our secrets.

Sara said she was influenced by her grandmother who was from Uzbekistan and married her 30-year-old husband when she was 9-years-old. Like Sara, Layla participated in weekly family gatherings: “Thursday and Friday [are weekends], so on Thursday we meet with my father’s family, and on Friday we meet with my Mother’s family. This is like every week.” The influence of weekly family gatherings was felt acutely; Nada said, “My parents is my everything actually. I miss them actually, and I can’t wait to go back to them in the summer. My parents is my everything. I can’t imagine my life without them actually.”

The United States seemed closer in reach to those who had parents who studied in the States. Manar’s father studied at Eastern Kentucky University and Tulane University. While he was studying, his wife was with him and studied English. Manar recalled, “She didn’t get her degree here. She get it from back home, but she study and went to the whole English institution programs.” Because of her father’s studies, Manar had taken more than one trip to the U.S. to see her father’s alma mater. Like Manar, Nawal’s father studied in the States and eventually encouraged her to do the same. She
remembered, “[His support] surprised me because he was at the beginning he was completely against it.” When it was time to come to the United States, Nawal’s mother, father, and little brother flew together to Washington D.C., rented a car, and took a road trip to her new hometown: “I was super excited because I’m gonna take a road trip, my first road trip in the States. We did not use the GPS. I held a map and read it for the first time. We got lost more than once. But we made it.”

Even parents who had not been to the United States influenced their daughters. Raja’s parents were both teachers at the beginnings of their careers. Later, both became administrators. Raja remembers a structured home-life:

We always have this organized lifestyle, so they always come from work, so we have like a dinner, lunch, together, then we, most of the time, we took the nap at the same time, so we can get up, and everyone does his work or homework, then we have to have the dinner together again.

Rayan, too, felt the influence of her mother’s pursuit of education in order to become a teacher: “She continued her studies even though she had children, and after she got the job, she had a job in a different city far away from our city, so she left every day. And she now can support my father when he was sick.” Like Rayan, Nana’s mother completed her education later in life; she remembered, “My mother, she didn’t complete her education. She sit in the home; she care [for] me, and my brother, and my sister...Because [all the children are grown] she can complete her education.”

The influence of an educated parent meant a great deal to those who had them; however, the opposite, as in the case of Rayan and Nana’s mothers, showed even greater significance. Qadira’s mother and father were both educated through the age of 12.
Zain described her parent’s absent education in relation to her own in detail:

You know since my mom and my dad didn’t know how to read and how to write, they appreciate education more than...I think they appreciate it more than any other parents since they missed that opportunity in their life, so they want to give me everything missed. They were like always encouraging me to do better that what I'm doing even if I'm a straight-A student they want me to do better. They want me to be the best instead of just being good, but yeah they were always support for me.

The support of Zain’s parents extended to her siblings; one of her sisters is a general practitioner in New York, another is a teacher in Michigan. Zain’s brother is also in Michigan, working as an engineer.

Having family already in the United States or who had been to the U.S. for study had a great deal of influence on the women. Manar’s brother was already studying at the university she chose to attend. She remembered what her father said: “He said, why don’t you check your brother’s college, maybe they have that major there. I was like, yeah that was fine…I think it’s going to be pretty helpful to have my brother around and not just be all by myself.” Some women went further in surrounding themselves with family members. Rayan came to the States with her cousin and best friend to join her cousins who were already here. Her sister and more extended family members joined her later at the same university. She described the family members who were already here as being helpful: “Because I didn't know anything about this place so it was helpful to ask someone, and I didn't have any friends, so it's good to have someone familiar.”

Even if some women did not have the benefit of an extended family studying
with them in the States, many were influenced by those who had been. Ahlam was present for her sister’s return from Iowa after earning a Master’s in Public Health:

I saw a different in her when she came back and even when she is talking to us about school, about her lifestyle. She traveled a lot; she was going east and west, and she traveled a lot really like she spend four years in here and travels to most main cities in here.

Nana was also influenced by her sister who had begun study in Arkansas: “I transfer to here just for one months to see my sister. After that my sister she talk with me to stay here, and my father and my job encourage me to stay here and learn more language.” Solidified by her sister’s and father’s encouragement, Nana stayed and has only returned once since arriving in the United States.

The influence of a relative, more specifically the blessing of a male relative, was paramount to the women’s future. For many of them, the male relative was her husband. Qadira, Sara, and Layla studied at the university their husbands chose. Qadira remembered, “Yeah [my husband] choose. He finish at ESL in Chicago, I think, and he research about a lot of university, not like just [this one]. [This university] was the first they accept him and his brother also here. They come together at [this university].” Qadira’s husband was here for six months before she joined him. Because he, at the time of this study, was farther along than her, Qadira’s husband’s success might have led to her failure to persist. She said,

But I'm afraid to because my husband will be finished and he will come and say...right now he looking about a master degrees. But I'm afraid when he finish he say no stop we will go back to my country…I can't stay here without man
with me here. If my brother or my husband or my father came with me, I can because SACM doesn’t accept it.

Although her success is not as intertwined with her husband’s as Qadira’s, Layla’s husband also chose this university and town: “He said I think it’s a city for studying and it’s like cheap.” He was at the university for two years before Layla applied for acceptance and moved to the States. Happy to be studying in the U.S. with her family’s support, she said, “My family is supporting me, like it’s okay with them, and my husband…I know some men, some Saudi men, are not allowing their wives to go outside…or like studying. They are staying at home.”

Family support for studying abroad being principal in Saudi women’s lives, the voices of dissention are often loudly heard. Nawal’s conservative uncle attempted to convince her to stay in Saudi Arabia when her brother’s visa was denied; her father’s intervention and accompaniment enabled her to travel. Manar remembered her aunt’s reaction when she heard Manar would be studying abroad:

It was kind of sad when my brother told my aunt that I was coming here, and then she was really upset. She said, ‘[Manar] didn’t need to go there. She could have just stayed home and just took whatever degrees she that she wanted but not leave Saudi.’

Like Nawal, Manar’s father came to her defense. She remembered him telling her aunt, “That what she wanted. I didn’t want her to stay here and feel bad and get bad grades…she wanted something else, so I’m not gonna force her to stay.” In Rayan’s and Lalya’s cases, the family supporter was the mother. A rejection from a Saudi university led Rayan’s mother to fund her education: “My mother told me that even if
you didn't get a scholarship we can send you to the U.S. if you want.” With her mother funding the first part of her education, Rayan was able to go to the United States. When Ahlam received news that she was approved to study in the United States, her father was against it: “My father didn’t agree [to allow her to go to the U.S.], but my mother, she saw me with not accepted in [any Saudi university], so she was so compassion with me, so she convince him to like accept the idea…she smooth the process a little, and then he agreed.” With her mother’s support and her father’s acceptance, Ahlam was able to pursue her goal.

Regardless of the educational backgrounds of the family, whether or not members have studied in the United States, or how many people in the family had pursued higher education, the family’s influence emerged as the primary pre-entry attribute for women from Saudi Arabia. As Ahlam put it,

My family in general…encourage education a lot. I don’t have any of my sisters or brothers [who] didn’t take her college degree. All of them are happy in college degree. I have an [engineer]; I have a teacher. I have one that completed her master’s in here, and one that is take a college degree. And, my brother is studying in England. I am surrounded in an environment that is encouraging education.

**Intentions**

For women from Saudi Arabia, the intentions to pursue a degree are not independent of the intentions to study in the United States. Many of them wanted to leave the environment in which they had lived their entire lives. Zain remembered with excitement her intentions to come to the United States:
I was like I want to learn. I was so excited. I was like, I want to learn. I want to see new stuff because I was like in the same home the same environment for 17 years, and so I felt like by the time I know like everything, so I need to learn something new...I wanted to be a doctor and if you want to be something that big, dealing with humans, you should be thinking out of the box most of the time. So, I was like you know living in the same home? Uh-uh, that's not gonna take me you know out from my box, so I should go somewhere else.

The drive to be some place different also influenced Manar: “I kind of saw everyone going in the same direction. I didn’t want myself to be like everyone else. I kind of wanted to go my own way.”

The intentions to study in the United States became a dream for some of the women. Raja said, “I’ve always dreamed about living abroad and having the excitement life. I am very close to my family, and I miss them a lot. I miss that atmosphere, and my family is apart from all of this...but I really love being here.” Nawal had similar dreams, strong enough to push her to apply for the scholarship without her parent’s knowledge:

It was my dream to come to the U.S. since I realized I was born here. But, I knew my parents were against it, so I didn’t pursue it at the beginning. Later, after I did, and everything was okay...Of course, I did it without my parents knowing. Everything was behind their back.

Even after her father approved and stood up for her after her brother’s visa interview failure, Nawal maintained it was her agency that brought her to the States:

“Communication was the reason why [my father approved my study]. I think if I did not
speak up or say what I wanted to do, I would have stayed home.” Nawal’s intentions were so strong, she admitted to not thinking about the implications of her choice:

I think because I wanted it so much, I never thought about, hey I’m leaving all my friends behind and leaving my family behind. My goal, my sight was like, I’m going. I don’t care who’s there or who’s not there, I’m going.

Unlike Nawal, Raja, and Manar, for some women, the intention to study in the United States was born out of necessity. The loss of opportunity to attend a university because of a standardized test score led Rayan to be pushed toward the West:

When I graduated from high school, even though I had good GPA, after I graduated, they made a standard test at least at 80, and I didn't take that...then my mother told me, even if you didn't get a scholarship we can send you to the U.S. if you want. And my cousin…she was going to come here, and she is my best friend. We always together; we studied all the schools together, so I was encouraged to come. I thought it will be interesting.

Ahlam experienced something similar to Rayan. New standards and overcrowded women’s colleges drove Ahlam to pursue another path:

At first I wasn't considering coming to the U.S. because of my father because I was coming alone…When I first graduated from high school, I applied in a universities…Because there was a new system for applying, I have to take a test that is not related to high school…it is about my major, about the courses that I take, but it's not from my university; it is from the Ministry of Education, so it was hard for us to take…I didn't do really good about this because it was new.

Now they have books, they have someone to teach them, but we didn't know that
because it was the second year to have this test.

I didn't have a good grade in that. So, in the university when you applied, they combined my GPA with the [my] result, and this created a really not good GPA. And, we are a really big country with a lot of student that want to get the university. Qatif does not have a university...like the newest [university] is a half an hour between Dammam and Qatif, and so you see that like female students, because it is a female college, so females in Qatif and Dammam is applying to the same university, so they have to limit the number.

Eventually, Ahlam married and came to the States with her husband, appeasing her worried father. The intentions, however, were a result of Ahlam’s path to post-secondary education.

This path, for some of the Saudi women, was inextricable from marriage. Layla, in convincing her father to allow her to marry her husband, said, “I told [my father] it's a good chance to go to the U.S....I can choose any major I want.” Although Sara and her husband agreed she would be able to pursue an education after marriage, the decision to come to the United States lay with her husband: “We are married now, so you follow your husband...You know who support you, but now you are married, so it’s your husband now.”

The intention to study in the United States and to pursue higher education became intertwined with the women’s individual goals of finishing their already lengthy journeys. As Nana put it, “Before I come to U.S.A., I didn’t have goal because in my country I have everything...Everything in front of [my] eyes, but here, nothing in front of my eyes.”
Goal and Institutional Commitment

Often first-time college students map out their goals and plausible institutions based on cost, location, and degree offerings. For women from Saudi Arabia, the first filter, cost, was eliminated through the scholarship; however, the benefit of free education came with the cost of the latter two choices. Although all women in the study came to the United States with the goal of attending college, none had the choices that many domestic students experience. Ahlam, upon receiving the scholarship, described meeting with a scholarship representative:

It took like three months…to have the real scholarship in my hand, and then I have to go in another meeting…the one that I meet with is going to choose a university in the United States to regard my major. My major was pharmacy when I came here, and he choose [this city].

When asked if she was able to choose the university from a list, Nawal, who like Ahlam received the scholarship before arriving in the United States, replied, “[The university] was chosen for me.”

As was observed in the pre-entry section, family had great influence—sometimes omnipotent control—over the women’s choices. For Nada, her father led the search for an institution:

Actually, the first idea [to study in the U.S.] came from my father…His first thought was [for me] to study in Canada, but he just ask about there and trying to find out some institute, some college, something like that, and he doesn't like it. And, he said I will not put my daughter and my son in a place that I didn't like...

He like [this city] because he know one of his favorite friends in here, so he
recommended [this city] for him, and he just ask about it, and search about it, and he said okay this a good place to my kids, so I will send them and he did. Like Nada, Manar’s father influenced her decision to join her brother at the same institution.

For many of the married women, familial influence over institution meant their husbands took the lead. Independent of his wife, Layla’s husband sought recommendation from an educational agent on a quiet, affordable city in which to study: “He went to office in my country where they can choose...you can say I want like a quiet area, so they look, they search, and look for you.” Like Layla, Sara’s husband sought the advice of someone independent of his wife:

I was looking for what other university have the same thing, but we pick out this one because [my husband’s] friends who graduate together—same major, the same everything—he was he applied for the scholarship. They did the scholarship together, so that they decide to come together to the same city together. Like when you first come, you know someone that you can rely on and help each other through all this, you know, because you been the same process, so they choose this city.

Qadira’s husband, too, lived in the U.S. and chose the university with his brother, only to have her join him two years later.

Regardless of how the choice of university or city was made, all women shared the same goal: to complete their studies. Ahlam said,

I insisted on getting a degree. I was so passionate about completing my degree and having that. And this is something stayed with me until now. Nothing
changed my mind. I wanted that, and when I knew that I’m coming here, I
wanted the experience.

Even those whose choices seemed intertwined with their husbands’ maintained goals
that were strong and independent. Sara, who knew she wanted to study psychology
since high school, said, “I just want to take my bachelor degree in psychology…I’m a
psychology major now.” Qadira succinctly summarized her own goal: “To complete my
studies.”

For some women in the study, like Raja, the initial goal remained the same, but
has shifted:

[My goal was] to get my degree, first of all, and find a good job. Well, I used to
think that I want to go home as soon as possible and find a job over there, but
now I’m thinking that I want to stay here. I don’t want to go home.

Manar, too, communicated similar goals of staying in the U.S. or the West: “I’m just
gonna stay here. I’m gonna finish my bachelor’s, and then maybe if I’m gonna take my
master, I’m gonna go to somewhere else. Somewhere big. Somewhere challenging.”

For many women from Saudi Arabia, the goals were antithetical to what they had
been told their entire lives. Zain explained,

I don't think of myself like, you know, like an ordinary woman. Just you know
my mom raised me, and I have to be, you know, housekeeper, and I have to take
care of my kids and be their mom and be his wife and end of story. Uh-uh. It's
not like this, and I don't want to be you know just an ordinary daughter. I want
to be something that's gonna leave something behind, so I have to finish. I'm not
gonna you know finish my story without finishing my school.
For others, like Rayan, maintaining a goal does not mean changing one’s identity. Her stated goal was “to get the degree and then get a job,” and to keep this goal she maintained, “It’s important to keep our identities…We don’t have to lose our entire identities to please others, but at the same times we have to be open minded and see the other people views.”

**Academic System**

Entering into the American academic system—one that is arguably unique and different from the Saudi system—was a shock for some of the women. The regimented quality of the Saudi system, however, positively impacted some, like Nawal:

[The Saudi system] taught me discipline. Like you follow the rules, and you do your job, you do your work, you're gonna succeed. You come to the States [it is] a completely different environment. Like, we learned to respect our teachers. Not a fear, it's just because she's teacher. She's doing an amazing job, and you come to the States—and I'm a teacher now—and there's zero respect. [As a teacher at the university], I was like, I'm right here trying to teach you, and you're just playing on your phone.

Without exception, all of the women in the study attended English language school when they first arrived in the United States. All of them credited their experiences in language schools to their initial success. Ahlam said,

[Learning] is so obvious to me because of [the language school]. [Teachers at the language school] made it that when you go to the university, it will be so tough to keep up with Americans, but it's not the way it is. I'm better than them in a lot of things. So, I'm so grateful for [the language school].
Along with Ahlam, who had never written an essay before coming to the U.S., Layla credits her use of language to the English language school:

[Attending the language school] helps me a lot because, first I don't know how to write in English because my country we don't write essays in English. So it's really improved my writing. Like they teach me they taught me how to code something, how to preface something with my words and even if I preface it. I have to like cite it so the idea it's not mine, which is really help me. I also [was] taught how to read. I was like reading without knowing where to stop. So this improve my reading. And I learn a lot of words. Like some words have different meaning and like some words they are similar in pronunciation but they have a different meaning. For instance porn and born.

In addition to learning the nuances of English at language schools, most of the women experienced their first classes taught by male teachers and with male classmates at the language school. Sara described making peace with her religion and working with men:

[I’ve] been in [the language school] you know how that was so…but if we really have to in some way or if [teachers ask students] to finish this things, you have to talk to a man too, but talking far away enough and with all respect, that would be okay. It's even religiously…it is okay but not beyond that.

For Zain, having men as teachers and classmates while in ESL classes was positive:

[Being taught by a man] was different. Like they were much easier than a woman…most of the time but that was really fun class… [Having male classmates] was fine. It wasn't a big deal… [I thought] I would be scared having
[men in class]...Actually, I was the only girl during my class in my summer classes...We were like a small family. I remember that time.

The experiences in classes that women had while studying ESL in the United States prefaced and prepared them for their interactions with the academic system in which they would have to navigate success for four or more years.

**Interactions with the academic system.** From the initial choosing of a class schedule to attending classes to submitting assignments, the day-to-day interactions needed to maintain success were new to the women of this study. Raja remembered not knowing how to sign up for classes:

- When I first started here, I was really lost. I mean, I did enter the university in Jeddah, but I did not get used to this system—the university system—yet, so and even the schedule on that year [at university in Saudi Arabia] we receive it. Like we did not get to pick classes, so it was like really different for us. And when I arrived here I was lost, and I don't know how to do this. How is this gonna work?

To navigate the academic system, the women had to rely on advisors, teachers, those who had been to the U.S. longer than them. This reliance meant positive and negative experiences were felt acutely and, perhaps, had a greater impact on their paths.

**Experiences with advisors.** Raja’s above confession of not knowing which classes for which to register was connected to her reliance on her unofficial advisor, Miss Cassandra:

- She's not my advisor, but she's like the advisor of the biology department. She is a real nice person. Although she wasn't my advisor, I went to her like every time
I need help, and she'll sit with me and make me understand everything that I don't, and she was a good helper.

Seeking an unofficial advisor after a negative experience with a primary or assigned advisor was not uncommon. Nana described the classes her advisor assigned her the first semester she was at the university:

I go to see my advisor. She choose me class at night. I told her I cannot come in at night because I didn't have a car and my apartment so far [away]. I cannot come and walk, and [there is no] transportation next by my apartment. She told me, it's okay she [changed] my university experience [to a] business class. Not difficult. Old Testament [was] so more difficult, [and] geography and agriculture. [This was my] First semester. My Old Testament and geography teachers…told me, [why are] you [in this] class because [it] is so difficult for you. [In Old Testament class] you should write 15 paragraphs in one hour. She said she had never written fifteen paragraphs in any language. After her Old Testament teacher discovered her difficulty, she contacted Nana’s advisor, but the time to drop and add was over. After this, Nana stopped attending classes:

After that I stopped going to class because I didn't understand. I stop going to geography class. I go just to agriculture class because the teacher very nice, and he explain for me. I was take C and for University Experience, I was take D. I feel upset because my GPA 0.75.

After that semester, Nana thought she would return home. Instead, another Saudi girl sat with her and explained what classes to take, carefully outlining each semester on a sheet of notebook paper, which she still has:
She help me for my schedule. She explain me every category what I should take what I shouldn't take, and I keep the paper now. I give everybody [who comes to see her that paper]. Every student [who] comes in and they need help I give the paper. They should take this class, this class here.

Paying it forward, Nana helped other students from Saudi Arabia choose classes, independent of an official advisor.

For Qadira, the advice of a non-advisor led her to change her major from Chemistry to Business. Her husband, in counsel with his friends, decided that Chemistry would be too difficult for her. She agreed, partially because she does not want to be a teacher:

Because all of them said it's very, very hard for them to study [Chemistry] here. And my husband said, I know. Also, I think it's my language it's not very perfect to take Chemistry. My husband said I know my some of my friends; [his friend is] very good in his language is very, very good [and he] studies Chemistry here, he said, he looked like crazy. He said it's very difficult; I advise you to change it and I change my major to Business, like my husband major. You know I change it also because I didn't like to teach after I finish.

Although her stated goal was to study Chemistry, Qadira changed it because of advice from non-advisors.

Both Manar and Nada had sought the advice and counsel of a teacher, Miss Kim, who was not their official advisor. Manar said,

She knows that I have potential and every time I go to her and ask her about something she seems really happy that I'm here. [When I go see her], I was like,
oh why are so smiling about? And, she says I know every time you come you have a good question, and you want to know more and I just love that every time you come in you ask me something I feel like you really want to learn.

The influence of Miss Kim as an unofficial advisor influenced Nada to change her major from Medical Technology to Public Health. She said, “[Miss Kim] change my mind actually. Actually, I love the major because of her.”

The dichotomy of the emotional pull Miss Kim had on Manar and the limitation she felt with her official advisor began changing the way Manar approached advising. In seeking greater independence, Manar said she began planning courses prior to meeting with her official advisor, who Manar said was not helpful:

Every time I come [to her office], I'm like I know what I'm gonna take, and I have [the university] curriculum. So I kind of you know went in to all of that and pick like the things that I want to take that semester. So, I know what I'm gonna take. She's like, no, I would rather you would get out a paper and a pen and write down what I want you to take.

Manar said she felt restricted by her advisor’s advice and preferred to change classes after her meeting was complete and her advising hold lifted. For other women, especially those who had been at the university for fewer semesters, meetings with advisors mean getting the classes they need to succeed and progress toward their degrees.

Teacher-student interactions and experiences. Although Nawal and others described teacher-student relationships in Saudi Arabia as more formal, women who had attended university in Saudi Arabia had to become more accustomed to making
appointments to speak with university professors. Manar said,

Because here you have like kind of protocol. I mean, you have to have an
appointment. You have to email them before, and you have to like ask them if
you can you know provide you [information], and you can ask them about that.
If they want to or they don't want to, you really can't just tell them get me that. It
doesn’t work like that. You have to ask in the nice way and all of that. And when
you go inside, you have to say like, ‘hi, how are you.’ You know all the stuff
and like, thanks and wish you would really help me with that.

Despite the differences in some of the office visit protocols, the women had positive
moments with teachers in classes; Zain herself even noted the shift in the classroom
environment:

Like, here I can raise my hand and stop the teacher whenever I want, and he will
look at my question anytime, but back home…the teacher needs to…cover
everything, then I have to stop her, which is like really stupid because…let’s say
I have a question over section A…you have to go all the way back…and by
[that] time, I’ll forget the question…but here, it’s much easier for me…I feel
much more comfortable here…you can talk to the teacher.

The shift in the teacher-student dynamic had a positive effect on many of the women in
the study. Ahlam said, “Here I have rights. I have the opportunity to argue
something…I can choose my professor…If I have a bad grade, I can go to the teacher…I
can argue with the teacher as long as I want.” This newfound academic freedom made
the women feel empowered in their education.

Layla admitted that some teachers in the university were difficult, but some
understood her struggle:

Some of them were…very helpful. Like sometimes…during the exam I have a question to the instructor and I told him, I know the answer but I don't know what to choose and was explaining to him [the answer]. He said, I know you are excellent, and you understand everything, but your problem is language….He told me, I won't do it if it's in Arabic, so I think it's like a good thing.

Opposite to Layla’s positive experience when stuck on an exam, Nawal described her first experience taking a test with a scantron:

The first time I used them was in the States. I didn't realize that A means true and B means false. And I marked [the answer] in the question sheet, and I didn't put it in the scantron. And when I told her after…when we got our grades I said...I don't know. I've never used it before I came to the States…She said do not use your international card with me….I've never used my international card, and I will never use it with anybody. She started antagonizing me and after every question, she would say, okay we will finish this conversation in the office then I was like okay...then would ask me another question. And that was during my major where I...made a lot of friends, and some of them were getting upset for me….one of my friends just held my hand. She was sitting next to me and [said] just breathe. And when she said that…I felt tears come out of eyes and was like okay we're gonna talk about this in the office. So I went to her office and of course being the Saudi student in me, I apologized, not realizing that I didn't do anything wrong…Then I realized that there were three or four other Americans in the class who didn't know that true was A and B is false.
For Nawal, the American teacher seemed to target her specifically for being an international student, despite the fact that she had yet to ask for an exception.

Some women experienced difficulty with teachers who were international themselves. Zain had an instructor from another country who, after she asked for an extension on an assignment because she was having difficulty with the language, told her, “‘I did that so you can do it this is not an excuse.’” Manar, on the other hand, had positive cultural exchanges with a favorite professor from Korea:

I can share with her stuff, and she can share with me. She sometimes would ask me stuff about Saudi Arabia and how they treat [women], and what stuff we wear back there, what food do we eat. She…wants to know about the culture. And I find that really interesting because I want to know about Korean culture as well. So I ask her stuff, and she told me that in Korea they eat dogs there. I didn't know that. And she told me, ‘Yeah, sometimes Americans find that offensive.’

The cultural exchange and sharing of what it meant to be an Other in American culture was positive for Manar.

The lack of pathos from international instructors like the one Zain had toward the struggles of international students was felt by Nana who was given a five out of 150 for an assignment. After making an appointment with the instructor to explain her struggles, she said:

He told me your grammar [is] very bad; you should go to the learning center to fix it. I told for him I go to learning center to fix it because I speak second language…He [got] angry [and] told me, ‘I don't care if you speak one language or ten language that's not excuse…I didn't care. This your responsibility not my
After challenging her on what she had read and Nana replying that she could not remember everything because she is a second-language speaker, she said, “He told me get out the office. Just I ask him again what [did] he say. He told me again, I told you [to] get out the office. After I get out the office, he told me get out the department.”

After the heated interaction, Nana sought the help of the international advisor and another university employee.

Although Nana’s is an extreme story, Layla had a similar experience with another teacher that led her to seek help of a dean. After learning she was pregnant and due to deliver her baby mid-spring semester, Layla approached all of her teachers to give them the information and inform them she would miss a week of class. One teacher had a three-absence policy; after missing three classes, a student’s grade would automatically drop one letter grade. She remembered,

[The teacher] said as you know we don't have a pregnant policy so I need to talk to my supervisor and ask her. Then she email me, and she said my supervisor said we don't have a pregnant policy. I told her I will give you a medical excuse from like the hospital. She said, ‘I don't accept a medical excuses because some of them fake.’ I told her, ‘but you see me pregnant.’ So she said, ‘Oh American woman go to schools the next day after they deliver’… [When I delivered the baby], she sent me an email like, ‘Are you coming tomorrow?’ I said, ‘No not for like one week. I'm not coming until my mom came. No one to care for the baby’; it's…the middle of the term, so it was very hard. [When] we finish the term I told her, ‘Okay what about my grade?’ She said, ‘As I told you three
absence will convert your grade to B.’ I told her, ‘Okay tell me where is your supervisor’…She said, ‘She won't help you this is the rules.’ I said, ‘Well okay.’ I went to the dean's office to complain. I told them everything. When they talk to her, she ignore everything. She said, ‘I didn't say that’…I remember she told me I think it's gonna be the last time that you have a baby in America.

The distinct discussion of not only the women’s individual academic issues but also their status as an international student was a recurring theme when negative teacher experiences were discussed.

Although the negative pathos felt by many of the women was extreme, many described moments of compassion felt by teachers. Raja described a communications teacher who told her to focus on her during a presentation:

It was really cool. I don't like to present in front of people, and I always avoid this. I mean I can talk to you like this, but not in front of like 10 or 20 people...no, no. So I was really nervous at the beginning, but [the teacher] help me a lot…She's a very nice person and she help me a lot and she encourage me to take away that fear and just speak.

Nada experienced a psychology teacher who addressed her presence to the entire class:

My psychology teacher in this semester is very helpful. At the first day in the classes, he just want to introduce everybody to each other and just say hi to friends, and I said...I remember I said my name is [Nada, and] I think I am the only international student in this class, so please my language cannot be very good with you. He said that we have to work together in group works. So I said this for them all to just to be patient with me sometime, and he really care about
His public display of support for her struggles in the class, especially with group work did a great deal to lead to Nada’s integration to the class. Of the attention he gave her in class, she said, “It make me feel like I am special…just to feel like someone is caring about me.” The same teacher helped her join a group for a project after she had difficulty finding partners, something that will be discussed later in the chapter. A similar extension of help from a teacher went beyond what Nana was expecting from a favorite math teacher. After she had had this teacher for basic algebra, Nana told her she was nervous about going to the next level of math:

She [told] me [to come] to her office, and [she said], I explain for you what the part you didn't understand or if you want coming in my [advanced] class…and see how I teach after that if you didn't understand anything, I can teach you after class. She is awesome.

Stories that ranged from supportive teachers, like the above math teacher, or teachers who revealed prejudice, like Nawal’s teacher, dominated the discussions, showing that much of the academic integration experienced from the women were connected to the teacher.

**Academic isolation.** Regardless of the influence the teacher has on the class, the women in the study faced interacting with peers that, in many cases, were not accustomed to international students in the class. Layla remembered,

At the beginning, it was very hard for me…to deal with…the classes…it’s all American. It’s really different sometimes. You are not finding international like you, so you have to deal with Americans. Their different accents…there’s
different people…there’s stranger people who just staring, so it was difficult. When asked what she thought they were staring at, she replied, “My hijab of course.” All of the women in this study wore some sort of head covering. Three, Nawal, Raja, and Manar, wore hats or turbans. One, Qadira, wore full niqab, meaning her face was covered with a veil. Ahlam had similar observations about hijab.

The issue with the Americans, like with the young one, they don’t like to talk to us a lot…the Saudi women who were hijab. I don’t know why. Maybe because of the stereotype they have or maybe they think that I’m not gonna respond to them or maybe they think they will stuck with my accent.

The decision to keep their hijabs was conscious for many of them, and, as will be discussed later in the chapter, was a part of their social integration.

Interacting with students who were not accustomed to seeing hijab or who were not international themselves were challenges for women who transitioned from the language school to the main campus. Nada said,

At [the language school’ there is a small community, so I can deal with people before I’m going to the university…[At the language school] we are all in the class; we are all friends. We all know each other, but in the university, you might not have any friends.

Nawal, too, reflected on a similar transition experience, mentioning her hijab in the process:

In the English institute, I knew everybody around me is learning English, and I was not trying to impress anybody. I was just learning and knowing for a fact that everybody around me is learning. And we make mistakes, and we laugh at
them and correct them, but I thought when I was going to go to the university I
was gonna have to pay more attention to the words I say and how I say it, my
pronunciation. But when I get it, actually nobody talked to me, so it wasn't
very... Like it was very difficult because they're again not a lot of Saudi women
wearing head scarf in classes, so I would be the only one and everybody is giving
stares or looks. Not a lot of...they don't say anything, but you know they are
looking at you like you're different, and they probably wonder if you even speak
English.

Nawal’s reflection showed the isolation and anxiety many of the women voiced about
wearing hijab, being the only international student in class, and having to perform in a
second language. Nawal could remember the first person to speak to her in class: “It
was history…and I was sitting in the front of the class, and he was sitting right next to
me. He always sits there. His name is Michael, and I think if I'm not mistaken he was a
basketball player.” Although their exchanges were limited to what was happening in the
class, the interactions were significant for Nawal to remember his name nearly nine
years later.

Nana also felt isolated in comparison to her experience with language school:
“Everyone finish their classes, she need to go to her home or his home. They didn’t
have time to talk…[At the] language center, all of them same family. They talk with us
together; they share their homework together, but the university everyone walk alone.”
Rayan described a similar isolation, “When I was in high school, I had many friends,
and the whole class we were all friends. Everyone knows me…but now I feel that I am
invisible.” When asked if she engaged others in conversation, Rayan replied, “I don’t
like to force myself on someone else.”

The women felt the onus to initiate conversation when those around them did not. Rayan described the moment of finding groups when the teacher asked: “No one talks to me…I look around…the normal [thing is] that you will look at the one next to you, and when I look to her, she look back [away]…” Layla described a similar situation, “Sometimes when we asked to be in groups, they like avoid to be with me.” When asked in chemistry class to find a group, the pairs sitting on either side of her partnered with each other. After approaching a group and asking, which for Layla was “so embarrassing,” they accepted her and the trio did well on the assignment. Unlike Rayan and Layla, Sara preferred to choose her own partners, wanting to only work with women.

Self-isolation, academically speaking, was also common among the women. For many, choosing not to participate in class or make friends in the classes was not necessarily a negative. About not speaking with her classmates, Sara said, “I don’t need any more friend, like I am fine.” Qadira also proclaimed, “I see the school is not like to see friends. Not for fun, for study.”

Nada agreed to a certain extent with Qadira and Sarah, and said that she would rather not work with her classmates: “I’m not selfish, but I like to do my work with my own self and my own effort. Group work…sometimes they don’t care about times; they don’t care about their responsibilities.” Outside of individual conversations with classmates and group work, Layla confessed to being hesitant to ask questions in front of the class: “Until now, I didn’t ask any questions in public. Actually, I go to the instructor after he finish the class and ask him my question.” Ahlam expressed similar
concerns with being on stage while asking a question:

I don’t like smaller classes here. I don’t. I don’t because I’m a center of attention. I’ll be the only one who wear *hijab*…The teacher will definitely gonna ask me something. I don’t like to answer in front of Americans. I don’t know why. I don’t participate ever. Not in English classes, not even in communication classes…I don’t know why I created this to myself.

Not being able to ask or answers in class being detrimental to their education notwithstanding, the women’s choices to be isolated may not have been completely in their hands.

Many times the contents of the class proved isolating to the women. Sara described needing more information to fully understand a subject:

If [the teacher] explain more the background…it will make more sense. Just imagine it will be the same thing if you just come [to] my country… [the Saudis in the class would] have common background. Sometime [the teachers in the U.S.] don’t think. Speaking English doesn’t mean you understand everything.

Layla concurred, explaining it this way:

Sometimes I have difficulties in Sociology classes…because it like talk about the American sociology. So sometimes I don't understand some jokes, some situations, and even in the exams [the teacher] give us examples about the American culture. So, sometimes I don't get it because I don't know the American culture exactly.

The fact that instructors were challenged, or did not work to, separate culture from learning and from a subject proved difficult for the women’s academic integration.
Beyond not understanding the culture in which the women were immersed, one woman felt her own culture being attacked. Layla remembered another student’s presentation on ISIS (which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, a well-publicized terrorist group at the time of this study): “In his presentation, he said, like, all Arabic Muslims.” Her reaction was one of surprise:

I was shocked because when he said that, all the student were looking at me, and I’m the only international in the class… I was trying to talk to everyone and being nice. It’s a small class. Just like to show something different from what he say.

In Layla’s case, the teacher handled the challenge to the student. Layla said, “[The teacher] said, ‘Oh, are you sure about like all Arabic Muslim?’ [He replied,] ‘This is what the media said.’ I was like okay.” As the sole international representative, Muslim representative, and Arabic representative in the class, Layla felt isolated by the entire situation.

For some of the women, success despite academic isolation has been their solitary experience. Rayan painfully summarized her experiences thus far: “I don’t actually feel that I belong to this place, but as a student, I try to give everything that I have.”

Academic integration. Despite being literally and symbolically worlds away from the academic lives they once led, despite feelings of isolation and trepidation, and despite adapting to a new system, women from Saudi Arabia academically integrated into the American higher education system. After affirming that the university was now a part of her identity, Sara said, ‘Just you learn so much from that place that it become a part of you somehow.”
For some, the integration emerged incrementally. Raja admitted to boys being in class and having male teachers as “weird,” but she went on, saying, “I prefer male teachers, actually.” She also revealed that ten years ago if someone had asked her that question, there would be “no way” the answer would be yes. For Raja, her time spent at the university was what made it part of her identity: “I spend most of my time here, and I’ve learned a lot from this experience at [the university], and I’ve known a lot of good persons and teachers and students…so of course it’s a part of me.”

For Zain, the process of integration came incrementally, beginning with visiting professors in their offices:

The teacher knows that you want to learn, and whenever you ask for help, they will be there because it’s their job to teach to even...outside of the class. If [I] miss something in the class, [the teacher] will love to give you second chance to learn. He wanted to give the benefit of that class, not just walk into the class walk out.

Zain visited professors’ offices about twice a month, more when she was studying chemistry. She said that being at the university and living alone had changed her: “I don’t see myself as the same person I was five years ago.”

Like Zain, integration for Nana took immersing herself in the campus, especially the tutoring center. She said she used the center “a lot. All the time. Three or two times in the day.” She contended that being at the university and living in the United States gave her a greater purpose:

I feel that I do something very bigger in my life. I have high education. I have…the Business Administration major here at [this university]. This is a
strong university…because [of] that I feel very comfortable. I feel happy for myself. I get high education…I didn’t care how many years I should be done, but I need high education.

Nawal, too, joined study groups as a way to immerse in the academic culture. She first described a feeling of shared isolation with other minority students in class: “At the beginning though there were three minorities in class: …a Russian girl, and African American [girl], and a Vietnamese girl. And, we were hanging out together because we felt that we belonged, and nobody else talked to us.” After another group of students invited her to study in a group with her, Nawal felt like she belonged, even though she knew she did not benefit from group studying:

I'm not very good in group work, especially if you want to hang out and talk and eat. If I want to study, I just want to study. I don't want to anything. So whenever we go to group studies, I was already done studying. And [I] just go there to hang out [and] get more information. Like if they are doing cases and like, ‘Oh okay, I didn't think of that,’ and [I would] remember it.

Out of all the women from Saudi Arabia in the study, Nawal had been in the United States for the longest. She reflected on her integration to the university: “It’s just…it played a huge role in the person I am right now. Being in [this city] and going to [this university], it changed my life…it’s a part of it.”

Nada described the campus as being a part of her home, a place that she can feel safe. She remembered the blue safety lights on campus as something that made her feel protected, even at night. She said, “I don’t feel fear, even if I stay [on] campus until midnight. I feel like I’m safe; nobody can come to me or ask me to do anything or force
me to do something.” Nada perhaps summed her integration up best when she said,

Every day I wake up in the morning [and] I think about it. I do homework for
[the university]. I am here in the United States. My document carry it’s name,
so yes. I will graduate and my certificate will be [this university]. So this word,
[the university] is something related to me.

**Social System**

Because the women had built their social ideology in a country that celebrates
separate spheres, immersing in a world of heterogeneous education, parties, mingling,
and friendships proved to be a precarious task for some. Perhaps in creating a preface
for their future lives, many women watched American television and movies prior to
coming to the U.S.. Ahlam watched American movies with subtitles as a way to learn
English, as did Layla. For Layla, she would wait for her father to go to sleep, and she
and her mom would watch American movies and television, including the show *Friends*,
on the English television channels: “My mom allow me to see that series. But like in for
like some [love] scenes she was like staring at me. This is not my problem.” Like
Ahlam, Manar interacted with American culture, although in this case at her father’s
encouragement: “He talks in English sometimes. He makes us read stuff, watch
movies, and I'm a self-learn person, just took the TV and watch whatever. Read. Listen
to songs and print the lyrics to the songs and try to memorize them.”

These interactions with American culture gave some women preconceived
notions about the United States. Ahlam described learning the difference between the
big cities seen in films and the small town in which she would live: “I used to watch a
lot of movies that [feature] big cities, and I'm sure that a lot of it is not true. I'm sure
about that…me living in a small town is different than the things that I watch.” Layla confessed a more telling revelation: “I thought that like every American women are thin and skinny.” She attributed that idea to the American movies that she was “addicted” to. The skinny/obese—or fantasy/reality—dichotomy of movie stars versus everyday people was more than just a passing observation for Ahlam:

We were shocked when we come in here; we were shocked [by] the obesity. There's a lot of [people] in here…that don't even walk. It was shocking to us sitting in Walmart…people [in mechanical wheelchairs]…I think it's upsetting to me. Upset to see this it is an issue.

Their reactions to what they saw in front of them versus what they had seen on television and on the silver screen was the beginning for women from Saudi Arabia.

In addition to consuming televised American culture, some of the women considered changing their clothing upon arrival to the States as a way to integrate in and interact with the American social system. Layla discussed what she had heard about the United States: “I heard a lot of stories about the Muslims in America and…the racism…, so I decide first to take off the abaya, so I feel comfortable and…it’s less complicated.”

Taking off her abaya meant she did so with her husband’s approval: “I talk to my husband, like, ‘how’s the girls there?’ and he told me they’re different. Some of them wearing abaya, some of them covering [wearing niqab], but you do whatever you want.” Manar described discussing with her mother the decision to shed the abaya and trade her hijab for a turban: “I actually came to this decision before I came in here. I told my mom that I wanted to wear this and that…She was really supportive. She said wear whatever you feel comfortable with…she was really supportive.” These acts of early
interaction allowed for the women to engage in the culture on their own terms.

As they began to interact with and, in some case, isolate themselves from, the social system in the United States, the women showed began to integrate at some level and in their own ways.

**Interactions with the social system.** Beginning with their first step onto American soil, the women began interacting in a social system that was diametrically opposite to the one they had left behind. Qadira expressed trepidation and thought that because of her nahqab, people would treat her differently: “I will be honest I think the people look so very strong about the woman who wear a scarf.” However, after a grueling trip, they found welcome at the airport:

[When] I came here, I was surprised at first time….The first person I came [into contact with was a] man…in the airport…My husband…our trip was very terrible, the first trip when I came here to the United States, and…my husband was very tired, and me, too. We didn't smile. The person said, ‘Smile!’...I feel comfortable because…he didn't…he didn't care if I [was wearing *niqab*].

For Zain, who was traveling with her father who was ill, the experience was not as welcoming:

The immigration…in 2011…was really bad, especially in Washington airport…It took me like almost like six hours like waiting in the line for the immigration, and my dad was sick…He couldn't handle it but like…and then like there was like a money guy who worked in the airport who was Arabic, so he saw my dad and you know...The thing how it work back home [if] there's an old man, they will take care of him…He will go almost the first, but that was not the
case with him when we arrived here.

Finding a kinsmen, a fellow Arabic speaker or Arabic speaking friends was a strong thread that tied the women together,

Zain herself was met by a Saudi guy who helped her find an apartment in the city: “It was not that easy, but I had a friend…He's the one who took my hand and…told me every single thing about [the city]. He's the one who took me around to get an apartment, and he helped me.” She had not met this person before arriving to the United States. Help from a stranger was common for the women. Nawal had pictures of her new home prior to arriving because of a Saudi man living nearly 90 miles away:

We had a forum for students who are studying abroad, and we communicate with each other, so I said in the forum that I'm going to [this city and university], anybody have any idea about the city, how it looks, living expenses, apartments. And he drove all the way from [the neighboring state]…and took pictures of [the university]. And I still have those pictures.

Even without someone to take extra steps in helping them settle, just having other Saudis in the city allowed for the women to have a soft landing in the United States; however, this created issues for some who found practicing English difficult when surrounded by Saudis. Raja described,

[Having a lot of Saudis around] is a good thing because I did not have to face the culture shock. They were like always there for me, but the bad thing that I did not learn English the way I should be. I mean the [English language] class was like 90% Saudi, so we talk Arabic more than English, even during class, so it wasn't good for teaching English.
Despite the chances of calcification or stunting the English language learning process, many of the women were reliant on their Saudi friends and family for social interactions.

As one of the first to arrive to the city and university out of the group of women, Nawal experienced community-building on a granular level:

When I first came there were not a lot of Saudi students. We were among the first group…There were like three or four of us, and…our personalities just stuck together…I feel because they were just [so] few of us, nobody cared where you were from, what you believed in, or anything except that…we are from the same country…we became our own community….Even though sometimes we would have—we speak the same language, but different dialects—and we have like if you take someone from the eastern region [of Saudi Arabia] and someone from the western region and when we communicate, there are a lot of words I don't get, but we learned each other's dialects.

Because of shared culture, women from Saudi Arabia found kinship in other women, and sometimes men, from the same country. Nada described her friends, all of whom were Saudi, as family:

They are my second family, so we all share the same pain, the same feelings, the same home sick, the same everything, so we just we are friends. I guess they will be my friends forever because being in [a] country that it's not your country and you meet somebody from your country, so you [say], ‘be with me, don't leave.’

Many of the women considered their primary circle of friends to be their Saudi friends, but others had expanded beyond only spending time with Saudi women. As Manar put
it, “I’m not really in touch with the whole group. It’s kind of like I have my besties in
them.”

The women who had befriended Americans spoke of their relationships with
Americans as helpful and beneficial. Nawal befriended the group of women who
extended the invitation to study with them; she said being in classes every day together
solidified their friendship. Nana explained what her American friends gave her:

They help me a lot for translate. Some words, I didn’t understand when I was
coming to here to transfer my paper for the hospital. My [American] friends,
they help me for translate some medical [terms] I didn’t understand or some
medicine. They help me for my insurance for my car. They help me how I find
transportation.

For Qadira, her American friend helped her while she was still in language school: “I
told her about [everything].” Zain became friends with an American girl after taking a
trip to Atlanta with a group. They later became roommates: “Since that day, we became
really good friends.”

Beyond being friends with Americans, the women branched out to befriend types
of people they had not considered prior to coming to the States. Zain befriended a man
from Saudi Arabia on her first day of language school in the United States. She
declared, “He [was] my best friend, and he's still my best friend.” Layla described her
three closest American friends as two women and one man she met through her classes.
She explained that she preferred to work with men over women, because men are more
helpful. She also revealed that her husband’s support in her friendship with her male lab
partner, whom he has never met, was integral to the friendship:
[My husband] supported me. I asked [my husband] to buy a gift for my partner because he [got] accepted in the pharmacy school. And he was like, ‘Okay, so what do you think we can get for him?’ Which is like for a Saudi man, I don't think they will accept the idea. [Accepting female-male friendships] is something good I think. The purpose is…he's my friend; he's nice. [This is] a way of changing the idea about Muslims to see like the positive side, like trying to be nice with [anyone].

Nawal, too, engaged socially with others as a way to educate others about Muslims. She described explaining things from a Muslim perspective to Americans:

I know the majority of those students…they never met a person from Saudi Arabia. They never met a Muslim person, and probably I’m the only person they’re gonna meet. So, with everything going on about Islam and the thoughts that go around, I want to give a positive view about it, and I know that I’m proud to say that I affected some people’s views about it, and that makes me very happy.

Befriending men, for Saudi women, was a distinct step toward the West; however, befriending those from other cultures, or even Sunni and Shiite students becoming friends, represented stretching one’s cultural barriers. Sara became close friends with women from all over the world through the mosque: “I meet people in the mosque most of them was from Bosnia. I know one she's from Turkey, Azerbaijan. Some of them here [are] American Muslims, too… I can’t count, but I have all these friends.” Because of the diversity amongst her friends, Sara said they communicate in their one common language: English.
Outside of gaining friends through school, some women sought friendship outside of the norm. Ahlam became friends with her daughter’s daycare provider, who became a surrogate mother for Ahlam: "She is 60, and she is a really nice woman. I changed her a lot just because she is talking to me and knowing stuff about me….She give me a lot of advices about here.” Because she spent most of her time with her daughter, Ahlam emphasized the importance of having this friend in her life.

Amongst finding friends from all corners of the city and world, some of the women engaged in groups or clubs on campus. Most common among them was participation in the campus Saudi Club. Nawal was a part of the group that started the club in the early days of Saudis on campus. She explained its purpose: “It’s a group where all the Saudi student get together, have events, and help each other, whether it’s translation, finding an apartment, picking up somebody from the airport, selling books, furniture…we have religious and cultural events as well.” Because the group consists entirely of women and men from Saudi Arabia, Nawal said, the meetings were conducted in Arabic. The burden to help each other through the Saudi club became apparent through Nana’s interview: “I don’t help any people because I have many things to do, but this semester I am going in Saudi Club. Someone choose me.” The emphasis on give and take in the Saudi Club left some of the women torn; Zain elaborated:

I did not get that much for my future [from the Saudi Club]…I get a lot of [time] with Saudis…[I] got the chance to meet almost everyone in [this city] and to know…Saudis here. I get a certificate like from SACM, which is good for the future, and I was a good person and tried to help people, and if I need help in the future, they would love to help me back.
The reason for joining the Saudi Club being more complicated, joining an academic or major-based club was deemed more important by some women. Manar sought inspiration in an honors-based club:

They tell us the new goals and objectives that we need to work on or people who inspired people before us...They will tell really inspirational stuff up there. Every time I go there I'm like, I wanna do something. I gotta get up. I'm not doing enough!

Zain’s participation in the Dental Club was directly connected to her future:

I don't have any friends [who] go to dental school, and I need to learn a lot about the admission process, and I have to have someone to help me, so, Dental Club, they were like the first people to go to…They were student, and they live the same thing that I'm living, so they know a lot of stuff. [Instead of Googling something], you need to hear it sometimes from real people. You know you need to hear their experience. [Also,] dental schools…they would love to see you know community services.

Their reasons for joining clubs echoed those that they had heard from others in their major and who had come before them.

Although they had to shift the ways in which they engaged in social interaction, women from Saudi Arabia showed the importance of engaging in a social system. Of her friends, Nada said, “They support me. They push me up. Every time, everywhere, in any situation, they are just with me every time.” Although engagement with others was clearly important, some women in certain situations were either forced or chose to isolate themselves from others.
Social isolation. The reasons for being alone, or the feeling of being alone, can stem from many aspects of one’s lives. Without exception, all the women expressed having felt lonely or having felt isolated in the States. For some, the isolation was a choice. Layla described choosing to be alone with her husband instead of spending time with her friends: “We are all the time together. To be honest, I prefer to be with him rather than going out.” Nada admitted she liked living away from campus because she liked her privacy: “My life is my life; I don’t like to share.” For others, the choice to be alone represented a more complex system of emotions. When alone in her apartment, Qadira would choose not to open the door if someone knocked. She reasoned, “I’m afraid to because [as] I said I was in small town. It was very safe, but when I came [to the United States] and I thought [it was not safe].” Nada, too, expressed feeling unsafe in a strange country:

I feel fear sometimes...because this building many times I hear the police came and [in] the apartment downstairs one of them the thief come inside and stole everything...I feel fear especially when I was in my friend's house and come back to my home [at the] end of the night after midnight...I feel like somebody is walking behind me.

Their fears, however, were not unfounded. Qadira referred to the murder of three Muslim students in North Carolina that happened around the time of this study: “I [am] afraid when I walking around the campus because there was some problem happen at some campus and there was...because I was wearing like this...I don’t know I became afraid.” In referring to her clothing, Qadira meant her niqab, a conspicuous symbol of her religion.
A few women mentioned their choice to wear hijab as a barrier to academic and social relationships. Ahlam, whose closest American friend is a woman in her sixties, observed that young Americans do not talk to women who wear hijab:

I don’t know why. Maybe because of the stereotype they have or maybe they think I’m not gonna respond to them or maybe they think they will stuck with my accent. So, a lot of things I don’t know, but the younger generation is not that nice in the university.

Rayan felt similar isolation from her classmates, but not because of disrespect: “It’s not like they do not respect me or something. A lot of people show respect, but some some of them not as well, but I don’t have friends, and I don’t feel that I belong here.” Nada, too, felt ignored by her American peers; she said, “Everybody is looking at their phones. Everybody looking at putting earphones, so if I want to talk to anyone maybe I disturb them.” Qadira thought she had found friendship with an American classmate, but when they met at the mall to go shopping together, Qadira sensed she did not want to be seen with her in niqab: “I think she afraid. I didn’t meet with her again. We complete shopping, but I didn’t see her again.”

In an effort to reduce the chances of an American being embarrassed to be with a covered woman in public or to increase the chances of unimpeded interaction, some might have sought the confines of a club—an organization with members who have shared interest. For some women, the opportunity to join a club was out of reach for various reasons. Qadira herself said she was interested in joining a club, but without a car she felt stuck:

I [don’t] have my own car and can’t go. It’s very hard for a Saudi woman. But I
like to [communicate] with people. I hope to do a lot of practice, but I can’t sometimes because [the club] is not in the campus…My husband didn’t say no to something like that, but it’s not…if you have your own car…you can go anytime.

A lack of transportation emerged as a reason for not engaging in extracurricular activities. Rayan explained, “We have a lot of…drivers [in Saudi Arabia], so I can simply call someone….In two minutes, you will have a driver, but here when you call the taxi, you should wait for about an hour, so this is a problem here.” Without exception, all of the women who arrived from Saudi Arabia had not had the chance to drive legally. Although some learned to drive in the United States, those who had not or chose not to learn had to deal with isolation. Rayan herself found she could not take a theater class she needed because it required going to plays off campus. Nada, who does not want to drive, described being stranded without a vehicle in a small city with limited transportation options:

You have to have a car in [this city]….I imagined that the public transportation [would be good], so when [in] the first week we are here in [this city I noticed] the university is very next to us,…[but] this is not the whole life. I want to see the city I live in…I want to go out, see parks, see downtown. I want to see everything in this city and I [was] trying to find the public transportation, to find taxis, to find anything. I asked [about a taxi], and they said you have to call them and they come to you…I called them they took about 30 [to] 40 minute to come to my location. I said…somebody told me about [the] bus, and they are don’t recommend it to me.

The feeling of being stranded without transportation was a reality for some. For others,
the feeling of being isolated was connected to other responsibilities.

Those with families or other responsibility used time to reason a lack of engagement. Busy with her son and husband, Raja’s time was limited: “I don't have really extra time to do these stuff. Between university, the house, my baby...I like to go to the gym, so I really don't have any extra time.” Ahlam said she “stopped [her] life] when her husband had to return to Saudi Arabia for work:

I kind of stopped my life after my husband went home…I used to go out with him…we used to go visit our friends…I do drive a car now, but I don't go to highway. I do go sometimes visit some friend in the weekend, but not all the time. Most of the weekends I will stay home for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and I can go to like the mall or something but because I have my daughter…If she will cry in the car and I'm driving, I'll be just out of focus, so I don't go out a lot because of that.

Leading the life of a single parent, Ahlam’s social life was limited to her daughter and what time she could carve out during the week when her daughter was in daycare and she was not in classes.

Perhaps more extreme than feelings of isolation and loneliness, two women’s experiences went beyond being ignored. When walking home from the library later in the evening, Nawal was stopped by a group of men in a truck. She continued, “A group of guys in a red pick-up truck called me a terrorist and threw a coke bottle at me. It didn't hit me, but they threw it.” She remembered, however, her reaction, which even she did not expect: “I just turned around and flipped them off. And I feel like they didn't expect that from a girl wearing a head scarf. So they just went on their way.” Layla
experienced something similar while visiting a nearby larger city with her husband:

I remember one day [my husband and] I went to [the larger city]. And we were in the downtown, and I was like wearing my hijab. [A nearby man] said, ‘F you Muslim,’ and he like put his middle finger, and he said you are [a terrorist].

Because they were in their vehicle, Layla’s husband told her to roll up her window, and he drove away. Reflecting on the event, Layla said, “Like most of Americans, I think they think that Muslims are [terrorists], which like makes me feel sad because like I’m not and not all Muslims are the same.”

Despite outward displays of aggression from Americans and feeling isolated from those around them, many of the women went back to homesickness as the primary part of feeling isolated. Ahlam said, “The hardest part is being away. I miss my family a lot. I missed a lot of the things…So, this is hard. This is hard.” Homesickness was so bad for Nada, it began to affect her grades. She said, “It’s affect my grades and my scores. It’s really bad feeling, so you can’t control it. If you just feel like you miss your family, you miss your home, you just don’t like to do anything else…Just sit by myself.”

Rayan, whose one class friend is a girl from Vietnam, said of her, “She was international, so we share the same pain…being in another country, and, you know, studying is hard for us.” She ended quietly, “Being a Muslim girl in America…it’s hard to study at the university. I don’t know why we had the idea that studying in the U.S. is easy. It’s not.”

**Social integration.** Despite moments or feelings of isolation, women from Saudi Arabia integrated into their new social paradigm. For some, this began at the language school. Nawal described the support she received from the on-campus
language school even after she matriculated to the university:

The cool thing about [the language school is] that regardless if you finished this year or last year or two years after that you still could come back to [the language school] and talk to your teachers. And even if they are not your teachers anymore or none are still [there], you can still come back and...It's just your home away from home.

These early interactions paved the way for the women to socially integrate into their surroundings.

For many, integration began when they met someone new or different, and the results were unexpected. Rayan described having Jewish professors:

I became more open-minded when I came here. I had some ideas that I changed when I came here….I had two Jewish teachers, and they were so nice. Not every Jewish person hate us…And the way that some teachers show respect to us makes me that I want to do the same to them, so I should show respect to others even if there are some differences.

Nawal and Manar both had experiences with homosexual teachers and classmates.

Nawal remembered her women’s studies professor: “She was my first [out] homosexual professor. And first [out] homosexual I had ever met.” Manar admitted having to change her personal ideas about homosexual classmates:

I change a lot of views about myself. Like before I was not really into the whole gay or lesbian thing, but now it's kind of fine because I've had a lot of classmates who were gay, and they were really nice to me. So they are really great people. I'm not gonna look at them as they're different or not normal because they're not
like that. They're really nice and normal.

For some, learning to drive and owning their own car was an act of social integration. Layla learned to drive with her husband’s full support: “I’m in an open culture, so I have to change something from what I learned in my country…This is what make me feel comfortable being here.” Even without a husband, Nana taught herself to drive using the internet: “When I was coming to here I didn't drive. I learn how I drive about myself. I get on the internet. I learn how I drive and I try for my car.” She admitted that she was scared: “I didn't know about anything: how I organize the mirror, how I look in who coming in next to me.” Rawan also sought the road and a vehicle much to everyone’s surprise:

I had this crazy idea that I just wanted to buy a car…They say, ‘you will probably wreck it. You will probably hit something. You are crazy, you will never had any training.’ I was like, that's fine I can work on myself. It's kind of a thing you teach yourself.

For Nawal, the driving process began with her father before she arrived in the States:

Back home…I always wanted to drive and being the rebel I am whenever we go to the desert, my dad would give me the keys or I would take the keys and just drive around even though I have no idea what I am doing…It was a semester after I came to the States, I went back home and I asked my dad to teach me how to drive, and he did. And he actually did something I did not expect him to do. He asked me to take my head scarf off and wear a cap, so people outside would recognize me as a woman driving a car. And I did, and I learned how to drive.

For the women who drove, the vehicles and abilities represented freedom, a topic that
came up a lot in conversation.

Nana said being in the United States meant freedom. When asked what that meant, she replied,

Nobody care about you. Do what you need to [do]. Nobody care. You need to go outside without a scarf…you need to sleep, you need to wake up, you need to study at night, you need a driving, you need a drink…nobody care. This is special life for everyone, but in my country, no.

Nawal, too, described the difference between being in the United States and being in Saudi Arabia:

I want to be free. I don't know if that it makes sense, but knowing that there is not a single decision you make is solely you make back home. Like you have to involve everybody. It's like, I'm gonna go to the grocery store…I have to tell my mom, take permission from my dad, have somebody to take me to the grocery store.

The feeling of freedom, independence, and self-reliance was expressed by more than just Nana and Nawal. Ahlam said, “I grew up. I think I lived in here more than I lived in [Saudi Arabia].” She continued,

I was pretty much dependent on everyone…In here I was independent, so I did everything by myself, especially when [my husband] left town, so that’s why I said that I grew up here. I did a lot of things that I didn’t do back home.

Nana, too, said she felt she had matured: “I feel older. I feel adult. Nobody help me. I like everything do it myself.” Raja concurred with Ahlam and Nana, “I have more freedom here. I feel freedom. I can be independent in everything.” Even seemingly
superficial freedoms were meaningful for the women. For Nada, freedom meant being able to return something to a store. She said, “[It’s] freedom for both male and female.” Nawal went so far as to get a tattoo on her leg that reads “Self Freedom.” She said, “It’s a constant reminder that I made a choice to come to the states to be free, and I am free.”

In addition to feeling freer in the United States, the women observed changes in themselves. Nada said, “I just become stronger.” Zain reflected, “I don’t see myself as the same person I was five years ago.” Nana described her feelings about marriage after coming to the United States, “Now when I was coming to the USA, I didn’t think about husband. Why I get husband? I have control about everything about myself.” Rayan, too, felt a change: “I am completely dependent on myself here…I feel more free here…I become more independent…I have experience.” For Layla, change began when she and her husband agreed they would shake the hand of someone of the opposite sex if that person was a professor or leader. This affected her life: “You come to the U.S., you have to change many things…I chose to start shaking hands. I chose to not wearing abaya, but wearing normal clothes, which is make me feel more comfortable than wearing abaya or covering my face.” For many, the changes represented a discovery of new rights.

Discovering women’s rights and feminism in the United States was, for Nawal, a self-actualization moment:

I’m interested in women rights, especially being from Saudi Arabia and like I used to do things that will express how I feel without realizing that I was doing it…Like for instance back home…woman put the food on the table. Woman cleaned the dishes. I refused to cook. I refused to serve the food for men. I
refused to do dishes after men. And I didn't realize any...like I was doing that because of the way...it's woman rights…it’s [me declaring.] ‘I’m not going to serve you just because I’m a woman.

Bringing light to what it is like to be a feminist in the United States, Nawal said,

[Women’s rights] means a lot…more than you think…A lot of American women take a lot of things for granted. The fact that you can drive, you can speak your mind, you can get whatever job you want to, you can get whatever major you want to. You have the freedom to make your own choices. I feel like you have to be a Saudi woman to understand what that means.

These declarations and actualizations, however, might have caused problems for some of the women when they returned home. Of her shift to independence and equality, Ahlam predicted,

It’s gonna make a lot of problems, trust me…I’m worried…because it’s gonna be a different life when I go back…My husband is understanding because he lived in here…but the society is different…[I will have] trouble adjusting and accepting the things that I don’t want to accept. I want my freedom.

For most, integrating to the American social system was about being open to new ideas. Manar said, “I get more acceptance of the views of others even if they are really different and strange.” Perhaps the best strategy came from Nawal:

You need to connect between what they perceive you as and what you perceive Americans as, and that’s when you realize, ‘Hey, we are not that much different.’ There is a lot of common things in between the religion and culture. And having American friends helped with that, and I feel it’s the same for them.
External Commitments

Like many American students who attend college, the women in this study had a wide range of external commitments that might have deterred them from their studies. For those who had families in the United States, the pressure was the greatest, but even the single women who were here had external commitments or potential external commitments that might have threatened their studies. Nawal described turning down a marriage proposal because he was against her coming to the United States: “I was like, okay, bye-bye.” Having a husband in the States did not necessarily mean external commitment for the women, but a husband plus family did.

The process of being pregnant with a child and actually having a child while studying represented substantial external commitments that affected schoolwork, as was seen in Layla’s instructor. After the birth, though, the commitment only grew. Raja, who has a son, said, “To manage my time with me studying and being a mom and everything, it was really hard.” Although her son and Ahlam’s daughter were in daycare, time had to be regimented for the mothers. Ahlam described her weekly routine: “During the week, I do sometimes go to the mall because she is in the daycare. I do go to the grocery, take groceries during the week, never in the weekend.” Because she balked at pre-packaged frozen food in the United States—“We don't have a meal prepared and frozen in the aisle…we cook from scratch everything in my kitchen. Everything is fresh”—Ahlam cooks, freezes, and prepares food for her daughter to take to daycare and for her to eat throughout the week: “I don’t eat on campus…I prepare the food myself. I bring that to the daycare [for my daughter].”
Cooking and preparing food, as well as cleaning, emerged as tasks that did not just interrupt school work but as tasks in which the women took pride. Nada described caring for the apartment she and her brother share: “In my home country, I don’t care about if the rug is clean…I don’t worry about anything…but in there, this is my home. This is my responsibility. I have to…make it clean, to make it pretty; it’s my home.” She saw this as a positive change in herself, as did Nana: “If my home is not organized…I cannot live. I cannot stay there because I love decoration.” Continuing, Nana described her week, “Sunday and Friday I don’t have time [to spend with friends…I should be doing a lot of stuff in my home…cooking, clean my clothes, go to shopping…I do all of my stuff for myself.” Sara also discussed her routine, “[I] go to class, come back to my husband…I cook food and then do the homeworks.” When asked if her husband helped with the housework, Sara replied, “With the house, yes sometime, but still it’s the woman job.” When she came with her father, Zain, too, had to learn women’s work: “I had to learn a lot of stuff because when I first came, I had my dad with me, and he was sick, so I had to learn how to cook, how to take care of him because I’m gonna be the one who is responsible.” Although she is not married, Nada felt that the housework was preparing her for her future: “I am responsible for all the house, so I think it’s very good for me and my future because…if I become a mother or a wife, I already experience to have a house.”

Preparing for a future life as an external commitment was also a trend. For Qadira and Sara, who were pregnant at the time of this study, the future was in their bellies. Qadira, who was due to give birth before the semester ended, said, “Right now I have a lot of essays and a lot of work, presentations, because I [am] pregnant, my first
[time], so I should finish.” Even without an impending marriage or baby, both Zain and Nana are preparing and shifting their education to fit a family. Zain explained why she chose dentistry:

That's what I was thinking…when I was [deciding between] dentistry or medicine, I was like mm-mm, with my hours because…especially in the future I'm gonna be a wife one day and I'm sure I'm gonna have a kid and let's say my kid's sick, I'm not gonna leave my kid for my patient. I know I'll have to do the opposite since I'm a doctor and have to make [the Hippocratic Oath]. The patient will be your priority. I was like mm-mm. They are, but not in that situation. My kids will be always the first.

Nana, too, had her future children on her mind while conducting her studies:

I think I need a good job to get high salary. I need to study more, to learn my children in the future, to get high education. I focus about my life very carefully…I organize my life, who come in, who go, who I meet every weekend, what I have to study for every weekend, [and] what I have the plan for 10 years in the future.

Outside of having a family, caring for a home, and thinking about future families and responsibilities, two women took on jobs that represented external commitment. Sara became a teacher at the Islamic center: “I do teach in mosque… [Even while studying English], I teach Arabic for my two friends…to know how to read the Koran.”

Taking having a job a step further, Nana started her own small business in the States: “My friend and my sister, they are encourage me to open this small business…I [cook] sweet and bring with me to meeting or my friend party. They suggest…why don’t you
open a business…I start this year, and it succeed.” She said she was accustomed to balancing work and school: “In my country, I was work and I study at the same time.”

Even without any tangible external commitments of which to speak, the thought of home remained on all the women’s minds. Manar said, “I can focus better when I know that everything is fine back home, and I know that my sisters are happy and my family is happy. That makes me happy.” Qadira said her priorities included good health and a good job, but “number one [her] family, of course.” Nada, who described her home and parents as her “everything” said that most Saudi families in the United States “have something related to their home country.” Nada had a flag hanging in her living room. She said, “We do this…kind of just remembering something…that someday you will come back to this place.”

**Quality of Student Effort**

The amount of effort the women had to exert in order to succeed was augmented not only by external commitments but also by the fact that they were all second language learners. Even those who admitted to not studying as much as they should displayed signs of hard work. Raja said, “I used to go home and study the lectures and do the homeworks. Like, whatever I got today, I have to finish it tonight, but now I’m getting lazy.” Raja, who is toward the end of her degree, showed some signs of slowing. Sara, who is at the beginning of her degree, compared her light schedule to attending language classes at least 25 hours a week: “I don’t really study much, to be honest…it’s really easy…I’m just a freshman, so it’s really basic stuff.” Even so, Sara described going to the Writing Center on campus to improve her skills and frequently visiting the tutoring center on campus to practice math: “The assignments [are] really difficult, especially if
it’s word problems…I just stare [to] find the equation, but then it’s just really hard, so I just go there.” Working through the vernacular of word problems that represent mathematics, Sara had to understand the nuances of English as well as the mathematical concepts.

Learning advanced concepts in a second language required extra work for many of the women. Nada said microbiology class was particularly challenging: “I try to learn English…Sometimes before I translate, I just think about the sentence and look up the vocab in the dictionary—is English to English. If I just get difficult, the last choice is to translate into Arabic.” Like Nada, most women had figured out that translating took a substantial amount of time. Again indicating the difficulty with words in science classes, Raja said,

We get a whole bunch of new words…that I really don’t know, so I have to translate it first, then memorize it, so this takes a lot of time. My major is mostly biology and chemistry, and biology is just about reading…this takes a lot of time. More than math or chemistry because, I mean, I know letters and numbers, it’s not a big deal, but all these terminology and these stuff…it’s hard.

Layla agreed with Nada and Raja, and said her biology class was the most difficult:

I know the material, but I don’t know the [terminology]. I don’t know the words, so I spend a lot of time to translate, understand. I wasn’t understand what’s the [professor] talking about. It’s a long and hard words, so I was thinking, I don’t think I’m gonna do it.

Zain, too, had difficulty with science, attributing her challenge to Latin-based science terminology:
It’s not like when I convert as a second language. For Arabic, it’s way different because I use the same English in my writing, and my speaking…Most of the work…it’s not English. It’s Latin. That’s what is driving me crazy because when I go to the dictionary or even when trying to translate it, there’s not [a] word in Arabic. There is no way I can attach it to my head [with] some word that I’m familiar to, so I have to start learning the word just by how it sounds or how it’s written.

Rayan described her efforts to learn in a second language: “When I read, I have to read it again and again and again…to understand what’s going on and to memorize.”

Sitting in class and listening to a lecture in her native language, for Rayan, was easy. She remembered watching a television program in Arabic about religion:

He was talking and I was writing at the same time, and I easily understand everything…I was thinking how it will be if it was in English. Of course…I will not be able to write the amount of notes that I took [in Arabic if I was writing] in English.

Despite the extra effort learning in a second language takes, many of the women’s study habits went beyond expectations. Nana said, “If I take 12 hours [of classes], I feel lazy student…Every semester I take 18 or 21 hours…I feel amazing when I have a lot of hours.” Layla described her manic study hours: “I always study all the time…I mean all the time. If the subject [should take] one day, I spend two days just to make sure I can learn everything. I also don’t sleep if I have an exam.” Ahlam revealed what it was like to study with a young daughter at home: “When my daughter go to sleep at night…at 8, so I study three hours before I go to bed and then I wake up before she
get up, so for at least three hours before I came [to school].” Zain studied the majority of the week: “I try to study at least five days a week…the weekend is for myself…but if I have something really big upcoming, I have to move myself and put my studies over that, but I try to study every day.” Manar, too, said that weekdays were for study and weekends were for herself. Remembering her days as an undergraduate, Nawal said, “[I would leave class] and studying all night. That would be a lot…as soon as I got into dental hygiene it was a lot of studying.” The onus of her future patients weighed heavily on Nawal:

When I got into the major classes, like this is stuff I need to know. This is what I’m going to be doing. I’m going to be dealing with human beings, and I’m gonna…clean their teeth, and I’m gonna advise them and teach them, so it was more serious.

The national board exam for dental hygiene also acted as a motivator for Nawal,

The end goal ultimately acted as a motivator for women from Saudi Arabia to work through difficult classes and subjects with fervor. Manar’s goal is to finish so she can move on: “I want to graduate early and keep moving…I still have things to do.” Leaning toward why she persisted, Layla said, “I work hard. I’m trying. I didn’t give up. Until now, I’m learning…trying to improving myself…It’s a good thing to be successful.”

Learning

Because learning was embedded in in their daily lives, most of the learning emerged as part of the women’s academic integration. Whether it was Nawal sitting in a women’s studies class with a homosexual professor for the first time or Ahlam learning
about evolution, the subject matter and environment was enough to stretch the women’s minds. Ahlam described learning about evolution:

I had an evolution biology class it was my first biology class. I loved the teacher a lot he changed my perspective about biology so I love biology because of him… [He changed my perspective] because it was evolution. We don't study evolution in [Saudi Arabia]. We don't believe in that…the course was new to me and interesting, so it was a blow minding in a way to think about life in evolution perspective. It didn't change a lot of my beliefs, but it did create something like...

Unable to finish the thought, Ahlam continued after being asked how she could study something in which she did not believe: “It is a challenging thing, and I like to challenge myself, so you just have to believe in your beliefs. You have to have a strong belief to not shake it.” She also described learning in a philosophy class about a society without government being barbaric according to ancient philosophers. She disagreed, “If we are a society of religion, maybe we would live without the government because maybe we will stick with the beliefs.”

For Manar, a class on human sexuality affected her already changing beliefs. Her friends tried to dissuade her from taking the class: “They told me, ‘You’re not married! You shouldn’t get in there. It’s really bad for you!’ I was like, what does that have to do with the whole class. This is an educational course.” Because sex education in non-existent, taking this class meant entering an entirely new paradigm of learning for Manar: “I want to learn more. I want to learn how to approach people about their sexuality and what they do exactly.” She said she has accepted sexuality as a normal
part of life and wants to help others: “I don’t want to feel shy or something…I will be in a position where I am educating [other women about sexuality], not making fun of them.” The same friends who tried to tell her she was “crazy” for taking that class began to ask her questions about the class. She replied,

I was like come on, you told me that I'm really bad person for taking that class and now you want to learn about it? Go ahead and sign up for the class. I'm not gonna tell you anything…I'm not married, but I could use that information later on. [I told her] you're married, you need that information more than I…She said, ‘I don't know maybe my husband will not agree.’ [I said,] ‘Why do you care about it just go ahead and if you wanted to learn, learn for your sake. He doesn't have to know about it. He doesn't have to know about everything that you do so go ahead. Take the class. Don't ask me.

Having learned about basic human sexuality, Manar said she wants to learn even more in order to help herself and others.

Learning went beyond learning new concepts and ideas. For Ahlam, taking a computer class pushed her to actually make something instead of memorize material:

[When I took computer classes in the past] I used to have the instruction in front of me and do the same. And even [Saudi teachers] teach us an example and [students] do the same. In the computer science [in the U.S.], it’s not. [The professor] wanted us to create. Like, I’ll give you the idea. I’ll give you the steps in general, but you have to figure that out. I barely made it. I barely made it through that class.
Mustering the responsibility and creativity it took to create unique products, including their own opinions, meant learning for women from Saudi Arabia. Manar said “being able to say [her] opinion in class and having others talk about it and give feedback about [her] opinions” opened her mind to new ideas. She said, “As long as they don’t say something hurtful or bad to me, I should totally respect their point of view.” Beyond going so far as to show respect for others’ opinions, being able to voice them in English was enough for some of the women.

Learning English represented the pinnacle for some of the women. Sara described the change that came over her when her English abilities surpassed her husband’s: “Maybe [my younger] age help that I learn faster than him, so now he’s pushing me everywhere to speak first. I make phone calls, hospital appointment…just what you need here, so he will let me talk.” For Qadira, being in the United States has ultimately meant learning to speak a second language, which seemed more important than beginning university classes: “When I came here, I didn’t know anything about the English, just the little words. Now I can talk, but it’s not perfect, but I can talk. I know English. That’s [a lot].”

**Academic Success and Persistence**

Without exception, all of the women from Saudi Arabia featured in this study had persisted or were successfully persisting toward academic success, despite challenges, homesickness, and differences in language. Nawal, the strongest among them and the only one in the group who had finished at the time of the study, reflected on the reason she persisted:

I hate to quit. I had moments where I was like, why I’m doing this? This is too
much. But I told myself you're not a quitter. You're gonna get through this. It's just a hard time period, and it's gonna…There is no reason for you not to finish this. And it helped me a lot in reaching my goals. Whatever that goal is...you're capable, you're strong, you can do a lot. There's no reason for you to stop.

She also credits her loyalty to her family for her persistence: “I don’t want to disappoint my family”; however, she said her family “has never been the main reason for [her] not quitting.”

For all other women, not finishing did not seem to be an option. Ahlam said, “My passion [is] I want to take this degree. I want to graduate. I'm trying my best to do that, so I think…I would consider something unique, not just because I'm international.”

Like Nawal, Rayan referred to her family when asked about her success:

I want to be successful. I'm not perfect, but I try my best. Being successful make me happy. It's important for me. I know that some people do not care what their grades are, but it's important. And I think that my parents trusted me, and I want to make them proud of me…They spent a lot of money on me coming here.

For Nana, completing school was personal; it meant independence and strength in the future:

husband? You know in my country the husband the man he pay everything for women. For me, I didn't care who pay for me or not because I have everything. Why I care about money?

Finishing, for Nana, was essential to her future plan and future family.

Carefully mapped out plans guided some of the women, like Manar:

If you have a goal or even a small objective that you have in your mind, even if it's crazy or you had for too long. And you think that it's not working or it's never gonna work or all the odds is all against you…you probably fail or something. With that all negative energy, you will probably get nothing out of it so if you really thought and go over it. You say I have this and this is my plan.

Manar spoke in terms of what it would take for someone to succeed at any university. In their answers, the women from Saudi Arabia gave advice for other Saudi women who were considering studying in the United States.

Most of the advice referred to the shyness of Saudi women that Nawal outlined earlier in the chapter. Qadira said, “Don’t be shy. That’s what my problem was. I’m very shy to ask.” Nada admonished,

I would advise her to be strong woman, as she is, and don’t feel shy when you…talk with people. If you have any problem or any questions, you just go and ask. American people are really friendly and they will help you…Even if you don’t understand what they are talking about, just keep asking.

Nawal said being shy could be detrimental to a woman’s education in the U.S.:

“Because she’s not gonna participate in class. If she doesn’t understand anything, she’s not gonna ask a question. She’s not gonna give her opinion about the matter, and I know
a lot of students who are still like that.”

Some of the women had more pragmatic advice. Raja said,

She need to prepare herself for the language aspect very much because it’s not
easy. We think we know English, but when you…I mean, I can travel and talk to
people, and I can do pretty well, but it’s not easy to go to the university and study
and read in English.

Layla discussed learning English, as well as the culture: “You should have a background
about American culture.” Ahlam agreed about learning the differences between Saudi
Arabia and America: “Living in the U.S. is not an easy thing.” Nawal added, “Keep an
open mind and don’t assume that you know everything about anybody. Culture is
like…they’re the same, but there’s a lot of differences. Take advantage of the
opportunity and enjoy it.”

In closing, Zain’s advice was the most telling of her success at an American
university:

You have to live an adventure. If you're not ready, then do not come. Do not
come. You have to be brave…I heard a lot of…people saying living abroad,
[away] from your home, leaving your country…a lot of people say it's for men
because… men are strong and they can handle anything, but when I first came
and I was young…I have learned it's not for men…You have to have [a]
big…heart, and you’re open to new people, open to new stuff. That's what you
need. You don't need to be a man.
Summary

American universities have recruited and continue to heavily recruit international students, outpacing researchers in the field of international education. Without the literature to support the needs of unique groups from various places in the world, universities cannot support students in their respective pursuits of success. Women from Saudi Arabia represent a population within a population, separate and unequal to their male counterparts. The distinct lack of research surrounding females from Saudi Arabia, especially those who are studying at American universities, makes serving them more difficulty. With more wives and sisters of the ever-growing population of male students from Saudi Arabia continue to arriving, and with the changes in women already seen in Saudi Arabia enabling them to pursue education in the West without a male guardian, the need for this study is clear.

The study followed a narrative analysis approach with 11 women from Saudi Arabia participating in three, face to face narrative interviews designed to build the story of their academic success and persistent. The study was limited to Saudi women who were studying or had studied at an undergraduate level at a mid-sized, regional public university in the South. Each of the women were asked a series of questions designed based on the research questions and Tinto’s model of student persistence. Additionally, all interviews were either semi-structured or reactive to the women’s responses to allow them to expand on ideas, elaborate on epiphanies, and fully tell their stories. Throughout the interviewing, transcribing, and analysis processes, the researcher took steps to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.
The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was coded based on Tinto’s model of student persistence. Additionally, each transcription was analyzed syntagmatically, and syntagmatic models of each woman’s salutogenic experiences were created (Appendix D). In this chapter, data were recorded that adhered to or deviated from each paradigm of Tinto’s model.

In terms of pre-entry characteristics, many of the women from Saudi Arabia had pursued education indicative of the Saudi educational system. Their practice and learning was based in memorization. Many of them, however, experienced additional schooling or outside influences that added to their skills and attributes. All women described themselves as strong in their skills; they said they were good students. As far as family was concerned, the women’s families ranged from educated and, as some would describe, worldly, to not formally educated and limited to their small-town surroundings. In all cases, the women’s families supported their study, even though some had to convince family members, especially influential male family members, of the importance of studying abroad.

The intentions of studying abroad and coming to the United States were clear to all women in the study. Although most of the women did not have a choice in where they were to study—some came because of their husbands, others at their father’s or another family member’s choosing, and some because of the scholarship—all women seemed to begin to identify with the university and the city from the start. All of them began study at the university with the intention of finishing, getting a degree, and, for most of them, finding a job after college.
Interacting and engaging in the academic system was challenging for all women from Saudi Arabia. The initial and most tangible change was learning with and from men. All of the women in the study adjusted to this change, and some even grew to prefer working with men. The level at which they, as students, had to engage in the material, avoid plagiarism, go beyond memorization, and interact with the professors was difficult for the women; however, most learned to immerse themselves in learning. They regularly used learning centers on campus, visited professors in their offices, and studied with classmates. Their immersion, however, was tainted with academic isolation. Many of them felt ignored by classmates or stunted by their own shyness. Not wanting to speak out in class or bother their classmates left some women feeling isolated. Additional to isolation, some women experienced instructors and professors who not only did not understand their challenges but also seemed to punish the women for their mistakes. Despite their challenges, the women integrated into the system, and they felt like their identities and the university were inextricable.

In addition to engaging academically, the women began engaging socially in their surroundings. For most of the women, their primary social circle included family members, husbands, and other women from Saudi Arabia. For some of the women, however, their American friends brought them into a social system that was quite different than the one they left behind. Like in the academic paradigm, all women expressed feeling socially isolated. For some, the choice to be alone was exactly that: a choice. For others, the choice was more complicated. A lack of transportation options, children at home, and familial duties were some of the reasons the women were isolated
from others. Again, despite these feelings of isolation, the women made themselves a home in the United States, integrating socially with their environment.

External commitments were common and strong amongst the women. Ties to homemaking, women’s work, and family held women close to home. Having and caring for children came before school for some of the women. At the very least, it made succeeding in school difficult. Outside of present external commitments, potential or future external commitments changed some of the women’s paths. Finally, the commitment to family members, even those back home, and country reigned strong in the women’s lives.

The extent to which the women were committed to learning and the content that they learned far exceeded the norm. Efforts to translate or avoid translation, as well as time spent reading multiple times to capture the nuances of a second language dominated the women’s study time. Without exception, all women described rigorous study habits. Their efforts led to learning new ideas that challenged their beliefs and stretched their abilities. Learning to create instead of copy, to critically think instead of memorize, and give opinions instead of repeat those that they had heard was integral to their success.

All of the women were actively and successfully persisting toward a degree. They credited their success to a drive to succeed and not disappoint those who love them. Future careers and families were also noted as reasons for persistence. Through their advice, they showed that avoiding shyness, having courage, asking questions, and never giving up were keys to their overwhelming success at American universities.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction
The majority of the women from Saudi Arabia who are studying in the United States are here either directly or indirectly because of the KASP. Before his death in early 2015, King Abdullah expanded the scholarship program to the year 2020, ensuring that Saudis would continue to enter the United States with the intentions of earning a degree and returning home. The newly appointed king, King Salman, continues to honor the scholarships and has shown no intention of discontinuing the initiative. This means that English-speaking universities the world over, including those in the United States, will continue to see large numbers of students from Saudi Arabia. In order to keep these students, universities must investigate ways in which to serve, integrate, and retain them, especially female students from Saudi Arabia.

Although the KASP maintains that they serve a great number of Saudi women, the limitations they place on not only the male escort but also the majors they must pursue arguably prevent many women from entering on the scholarship. As of the most recent published numbers, only about 20 percent of the scholarship recipients are female (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). This figure, however, does not account for women who are studying without a scholarship (or male escort in some cases).

The sum of women studying with and without a scholarship will arguably grow in the coming years for a number of reasons. First, the scholarship program already serves a great deal of Saudi men who are of traditional college age. In a country where formalized education is not the rule, the approximately 77,000 men who study with
scholarship may represent a majority of eligible male recipients. Although more will continue to come of age each year, there is arguably funding available for more recipients than those who are eligible. Additionally, as more males come to the United States to study, more female relatives will gain opportunity. Finally, as the world continues to change with regards to gender parity so will Saudi Arabia. The embassy’s website alone shows at least an attempt to show that even the most conservative-minded Saudis recognize the need to expand the workforce to include women. These factors combined will inevitably mean more women from Saudi Arabia studying at American institutions of higher education. This research will help understand what has led to the persistence of female students from Saudi Arabia.

This study utilized a qualitative narrative analysis approach using Tinto’s model of student persistence (1997) to determine how women from Saudi Arabia are persisting at American universities. An interview schedule that sought to address both the research questions and Tinto’s model was created and used in three face-to-face interviews with each respective participant. Women from Saudi Arabia who were currently pursuing or had pursued an undergraduate degree from an American university were contacted for this study. Ultimately, 11 valid participants were identified, signed a consent form, and participated in three interviews each that ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to be coded. The coding was analyzed using syntagmatic analysis in order to find the salutogentic factors of each participant’s success.

Chapter four provided the results of the interviews, synthesized using Tinto’s model of student persistence. Using a voluminous amount of direct quotations, the
researcher allowed each woman’s voice to tell her own story; this method aligned with the stated goals for the role of the researcher in this study. The stories of the women were placed in line or, in some cases, out of line with Tinto’s model of student persistence.

Chapter five presents a discussion of the findings and their relation to the research questions. The findings are paired with information from the literature review and other current research in order to show how this research is aligned with research on internationalization, retention, and students from Saudi Arabia. Additionally, this chapter reveals notable conclusions based on the women’s stories. Each section in the discussion of findings begins with a statement of the research question in order to connect the results to the goals of the study. Because Tinto’s model is syntagmatic in itself, many of the discussions overlap. In other words, the persistence that is discussed after the first research question dovetails with the integration that is discussed in the third research question; the two are diametrically inextricable. Subsequent to the discussion of findings is a recommendations section that addresses universities, instructors, and future research. The chapter ends with a conclusion that encompasses the study.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings presented here show that female students from Saudi Arabia follow Tinto’s revised model of student persistence (1997) to a significant extent; however, they deviate from the model in terms of academic and social interactions. Overall, women from Saudi Arabia successfully persist and succeed in institutions of higher education despite feelings of social and academic isolation. These moments, some
reoccurring, of isolation are not enough, however, to overwhelm or cancel out the amount of effort they put forth, support they receive from friends and family, and relationships they build with key figures on the college campus.

**Research Question One— How (or to what degree) are female students from Saudi Arabia socially and academically integrating into their institutions?**

As Tinto and other researchers in the field of retention argued, in order to succeed at a university, students must academically and socially integrate into their surroundings (1997). Doing so, however, is challenging for subgroups like international students (Andrade, 2006-2007). Integration becomes even more difficult to occur if the students represent a subgroup within a subgroup within a subgroup of students. In other words, women from Saudi Arabia are a subgroup of students from Saudi Arabia who are a subgroup of international students. As Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) contended,

Saudi women face significant cultural differences during their sojourn in the United States, such as taking classes taught by male professors, being in classrooms with male students, being able to drive a car, and having no gender segregation in public settings such as banks, hospitals, and offices. (p. 3)

Coming from a society with rigid social and educational controls, women from Saudi Arabia had to overcome many obstacles to begin interacting with and integrating in the social and academic realms of their new paradigms.

Socially, the women in this study began integrating to the culture of the United States long before they arrived. By consuming American television, movies, and music, and listening to their friends and family members who had been to or lived in the States,
Saudi women began building perceptions of the United States. These perceptions would guide or misguide them in their early interactions with the social norms and mores of American life. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) attributed knowledge gained from media sources as a pull factor for students who study abroad. Specific to women from Saudi Arabia, Lefdhall-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) discovered similar pre-arrival perceptions versus reality occurrences with women who studied abroad in the United States. Despite some perception-shattering moments, by watching American television and listening to tales of the United States from those who had traveled and studied before them, women from Saudi Arabia began telling themselves the narrative of their life in America long before they arrived, which no doubt aided in their integration.

Their social integration manifested itself in more than just the women befriending Americans. Women were able to shed previously prejudiced ideas about Jewish and homosexual people and accept them as equals. By being open to their ideas and seeing that, in the case of Jewish people, many do not treat Muslims negatively, women from Saudi Arabia were able to integrate into a diverse environment. Additionally, many of the women in the study significantly integrated in their new social environment through their interactions with men. Alhazmi (2010) described a mixed gender environment as a threat to Saudi women who had spent their entire post-pubescent lives in single-gendered situations. The women from Saudi Arabia gained comfort and confidence in their interactions with men, integrating into the heterogeneous social environment.

Women were given opportunities to interact closely with men in a fixed social environment through student and academic clubs; however, the majority of the women
in this study did not partake in clubs. Those who did had the Saudi club in common; however, the Saudi club was seen as a social obligation instead of a social outlet. The two women who did participate in clubs that were not the Saudi club did so because the club connected to their academic goals. Mamiseishvili (2012) also found that club participation did not comprise the majority of international students’ social interactions.

As Mamiseishvili (2012) discovered with a study of international students in general, much of the women’s social integration happened off campus. Befriending other women from Saudi Arabia and other Muslims, the women relied on off-campus friends to support them socially. As a result, most were pleased with their social situations, which is significant to their success. Although Andrade (2006) and Sherry et al. (2010) regarded this behavior as ghettoization, having a primary set of Saudi female friends did not seem to affect the participants’ success. The key factor was that they had a social support network. Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002-2003) concluded that a strong social network that provided support for international students was important to allay homesickness and isolation, and they determined that a social support network was more important to international students than domestic students. For many of the women, the social support network extended beyond friends and encompassed family who were studying in the States or who were back home. Baba and Hosoda (2014) determined social support alleviated some acculturative stress. The female Saudi students’ families acted as proxy social support networks when they felt they had none.

Isolation or the feeling of isolation was common amongst women from Saudi Arabia. Barriers to friendship and classmate relationships with American students were presented symbolically as the *hijab*. The women determined that the *hijab* made them

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different; as an Other, they were ignored or dismissed by their classmates. Cole and Ahmadi’s (2003) study showed that the hijab creates a distinction between those who veil and those who do not. Even for those who do not veil, finding American friends is difficult for international students. Jammaz (1972) agreed that it was difficult for international students to befriend Americans. The onus to befriend is placed on the international student, as was seen in this research. Some of the women simply chose not to seek American friends as a way to avoid this struggle.

Beyond the straightforward isolation felt by all the participants, some experienced outright discrimination in the classroom and threats of verbal and physical abuse in the community. Lee and Rice (2007) discovered that students from Asian and Middle Eastern countries experienced imperialistic attitudes and discrimination when studying in the United States. In the cases of the women who had these negative experiences, they reflected on how the negativity strengthened their sense of self and independence.

The most outright, conspicuous signs of social integration came when the women discussed the changes in themselves, including adopting women’s rights, gaining independence and freedom, and choosing to uncover. In their study of women from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States, Lefahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) found similar declarations of freedom and independence. Women from Saudi Arabia who had been, in the paraphrased words of one of the participants, told from the start to be a good wife and mother, declared themselves free from what society had dictated them to be. To be independently in pursuit of education for the benefit of the
self is a decidedly Western practice in which these women participated without hesitation.

To academically integrate into a system of free and critical thought, where professors encourage debate and challenges to ideas, and where excellence is not necessarily determined by the quality that one memorizes but the quality that one produces was a significant leap for these women. To create, as one said, was a new verb, a new action in which few had partaken. Hamdan (2009) and Andrade (2006) concurred that education in Saudi Arabia is primarily based in direct instruction from the teacher and memorization from the students. Although a great deal of instruction in the United States still requires memorization, especially in the STEM fields, much of the information must be applied to various situations, in which case memorization does little to help. The women in this study showed that they had to integrate to in a system of higher-order thinking in order to succeed.

In order to integrate, the women in this study created relationships with professors that were unlike those they had created in Saudi Arabia. In visiting offices, asking for help, and creating academic relationships with professors, the women academically integrated. Jiang Bresnahan and Cai (2000) pointed out that in non-Western cultures, the power distance between the professors and students is greater than in Western cultures. Although it can be seen as lessening the power distance, and therefore relaxing the classroom environment, assimilating to a more informal approach can be challenging (Schutz & Richards, 2003). Additionally, the teaching styles of professors in the West tend to be more informal. McDermott-Levy (2010) contended that teaching styles and strategies in the West were difficult for students to adjust to.
The women in this study reported preferring a Western, student-centered approach, which is significant in revealing their academic integration.

For the women from Saudi Arabia in this study, academic and social integration were linked to but still a smaller part of their academic persistence at American universities. The level to which they set and kept goals, the amount of effort they put into their studies, and the support they received from their family while doing so represented stronger more steadfast paths toward success.

Research Question Two—What perceptions do female students from Saudi Arabia have of personal and institutional goals surrounding their success?

Having a goal or an aim and reaching it despite a path marred with challenges to overcome is the very nature of the manifest destiny on which the myths of American success have been built. The idea that anyone can do anything no matter what is one that is not unfamiliar to most Americans; however, it is only a few among us that achieve the seemingly unachievable. For the women from Saudi Arabia, seeking and pursuing the goal of studying in the United States and succeeding in their education was the light they followed. Of all the factors that led to success, Mamiseishvili (2012) concluded that determination to succeed and goal-oriented behaviors were most significant. These findings are concurrent with what was found in this study.

The women in this study displayed a significant amount of agency in their decisions to study abroad. Although most of them needed the permission or accompaniment of a male relative, all but three of the women navigated boundaries, convincing key deciders of their need to study abroad. Going so far as to steal documents and refuse to stay, one participant embodied the insistence on gaining an
American education. For another, getting married acted as the bargaining chip she needed to get to the United States. By using a combination of subversive and overt techniques, the women in this study saw through the first part of their goals.

For all participants, the goal of studying abroad was tied to at least one person in their families. This is indicative of the emphasis on family that is placed by Saudi Arabian people (Pharaon, 2004). For some, the goal began with a family member’s idea to and research on study abroad. For others, in the case of those who were married, the goal itself lay with the husband. The married women in this study did not see following their husbands to the university of their choosing as a giving up of power; rather, they saw going anywhere in the United States as an opportunity for education and experience. Kim (2001) found that the specific community in which the university was housed was not a pull factor for international students. For most of the women from Saudi Arabia who commented on their communities, safety was most important, not a specific state or area of the United States. Tinto (1997) maintained that pulling away from the familial center and building a new identity that is connected to university study and adulthood is a part of integration; however, women from Saudi Arabia maintain close, unbreakable ties with their families while pursuing their academic goals. To merely suggest separating oneself ideologically or emotionally from one’s family is for a Saudi woman—who hails from a collectivist, familial culture—akin to asking her to sever her own arm. Again, for women from Saudi Arabia academic goals are as connected to family as they are to themselves.

In fact, determining and setting goals based on future careers and family, not despite family, was common amongst women from Saudi Arabia. Having a goal beyond
degree completion is important, as Tinto suggested (1997). For women from Saudi Arabia, a career goal is most-likely tied to her future husband, children, and home life. The degree to which they held steadfast to this goal was indicative in their resilience in facing difficult coursework, unwelcoming teachers, and classmates who would rather have worked with someone else.

The women in this study saw their professors as the embodiment of the university. Stohl (2007) examined instructors’ perceptions of international students in the classroom and found negativity amongst them. These findings somewhat reflect what the women from Saudi Arabia experienced in their classes. Most women had experienced some form of negativity, neglect, or abrasiveness from professors. Their determination to overcome these experiences and receive justice shows a strong connection to their personal academic goals. With every negative experience, however, there was a story of a beloved teacher or advisor, someone who inspired, encouraged, and helped. The women in this study were what Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) called help-seekers. This help-seeking behavior meant that the women found someone who could help them and whom they could trust. For many, that person was not their assigned advisor.

In the events of an unsatisfactory or negative experience with an advisor, the women often sought the help of a proxy advisor. The examples in this study include a fellow Saudi woman, an advisor not specifically assigned to the woman’s major, a teacher, and, most telling, a husband. For the relationships with those not considered a part of the university proper, these speak to the help-seeking, collectivist behavior of Saudi culture. The husband in a Saudi relationship is the nucleus of household and
family decisions (Pharaon, 2004). That a woman’s husband would be the proxy for the representation of institutional goals is indicative of Saudi relationships. Those in the university who did act as proxy advisors became special contacts for the women in this study. Although their reliance on advisors might not have been as strong as others, the participants trusted their university contacts to encourage them to complete their goals.

Overwhelmingly, the women from Saudi Arabia in this study were pursuing the singular goal of attaining higher education. Although many of these goals were in tandem with future families, husbands, and friends, the personal and academic goals acted as motivators, pushing them through the myriad external commitments, challenges, and triumphs of persistence.

**Research Question Three— How do female students from Saudi Arabia academically persist at American universities?**

Without exception, the women from Saudi Arabia in this study were academically persisting toward or had successfully completed a bachelor’s degree at an American university. In doing so, each woman had experienced or had been the change agent in a multitude of salutogenic events (Appendix D). Andrade (2006-2007) found that when students balance academic responsibilities, work, and social lives, successfully adjust to a new academic paradigm, and gain confidence in their academic and non-academic abilities then they were able to successfully persist toward their academic goals. The findings of this research are aligned with Andrade’s research and, for the most part, Tinto’s revised model of student persistence (1997). The moments of deviance from the model came at times when isolation trumped interaction, either by
choice or by chance. Despite these feelings or times of isolation, the women successfully persisted toward their goals.

All participants pointed to their families in one way or another as the catalyst for their sojourns abroad. Notably, the women often sought the support of a male relative; however, two of the women in the study pointed to a female relative as the supporter or benefactor of travel. For most of the women, a certain amount of convincing, bargaining, or even subversive actions accompanied convincing family members to allow them to go. Although all of the women came to the United States as legal adults, all of them required family support before leaving their home countries. This is in line with Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who discovered family to be a push factor in study abroad. An even greater push factor for women from Saudi Arabia was having a relative who had studied or was currently studying abroad in the United States. Not only did this inspire more than a few fathers to send their daughters abroad, it also allowed for an easier transition and acclimation for the women to have family in the States.

If family were present in the States, the members became the women’s immediate support system, taking precedence over all other systems. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) noted, “For most of the [Saudi] women, their closest relationships and social support were found in their Saudi family and friends” (p. 16). The family members helped with housing, transportation, and navigation of the new social system, all factors that Poyrazli and Graham (2007) noted as small but important obstacles to overcome as a new international student. The women in this study persisted as single beings, but those who had family or, as some indicated, friends as proxy family, seemed to have a softer landing in their American home.
The women in this study made decisions and experienced pre-university training that also prepared them for landing in the United States. All but two participants chose to go to public high schools, where curriculum and assessment standards were higher and more challenging. Some of the women had attended university in Saudi Arabia or, in one case, a neighboring country. These experiences no doubt exposed them to a system of higher education, albeit one unlike the American system. Most important to their success, they seemed to indicate, was the English language training they received either through after-school programs in Saudi or in intensive English language programs (IEP) in the United States. Hanover Research (2010) and Sherry et al. (2010) discovered that non-native speakers of English need English language support even after attaining an admissible standardized English entrance examination score. The women in this study credited their experiences in IEPs with acclimating them to American higher education norms and expectations, introducing them to their early friends, and teaching them to use their English skills in academic ways. The social and academic impact of pre-university training that included English language preparation was significant with the women.

The women’s interactions with social and academic systems were discussed earlier in the chapter. It is worth noting again here that the women interacted with and integrated into both the social and academic systems in which they lived; however, their engagement in classes, with classmates, and with students unlike themselves did not seem to have the same gravity as Tinto assigns to them in his models. To be sure, the in- and out-of-class interactions the women had with professors, classmates, and friends had an impact on them, but more moments of epiphany and support were revealed when
discussing family and friends from Saudi Arabia. Again, Andrade (2006) called this a ghettoization of international students and contended that international students, in order to acclimate, need to interact with their American counterparts; however, this self-elected form of ghettoization that the women in this study partook in did not seem to affect their progress. Where negativity and even remorse shone through was when the participants discussed being ignored by their classmates. Although this alone did not negatively impact their grades, it did affect their emotional perception of attending class and learning.

Despite the isolation, the women in this study remained engaged in some activity nearly every day. The external commitments of family—including husbands, children, cousins, and siblings—, friends, and work dominated their lives when they were not in school. As many of the married women indicated, their lives when not in class included cleaning, cooking, and caring for children as part of the women’s work. Pharaon (2004) maintained that while women could pursue higher education in Saudi Arabia, it could not act as a replacement for the work of a wife and mother. The women in this study took those tasks in stride as a part of their daily tasks. For the single women, keeping a home and having pride in that home was revealed as a significant part of their lives. Additionally, gaining independence and skill from having a job allowed for one woman to experience balancing three primary parts of her life: home, school, and work. Most significantly, most women saw the success they achieved in their external commitments as being a successful woman.

How they achieved this success was revealed again and again in this study: hard work. Astin (1977, 1985) recognized student effort as an element of persistence.
Without exception, the participants in this study exerted an enormous amount of time and effort to succeed in their classes. Descriptions of reading and re-reading texts, studying for hours, overcoming new types of assignments, and learning how to critically think and create dominated the academic conversations of this study. The women used tutoring centers, labs, and each other to boost their understanding of their classes and the system itself. They made appointments with professors, even though for most a formal appointment was a new rhetoric to navigate. They asked questions, even if it meant staying after class to avoid asking questions in public. They re-learned information that they already knew in their native language, even if it meant hours of attempting to learn the words in context rather than turn to a dictionary or translator. They sought new information, even if it diametrically disagreed with their fundamental beliefs and shook them to the core. Their diligence, effort, and determination to succeed dominated over every other aspect of Tinto’s revised model of persistence (1997).

For women from Saudi Arabia to successfully persist, they showed a strong foundation of family support and prior schooling, especially participation in English language programs. Their determination to succeed allowed them to navigate difficult or non-existent social and academic interactions and situations. Despite these difficulties as well as external commitments, the women successfully academically persisted and succeeded at American universities.

**Summary**

This study found that women from Saudi Arabia successfully persist toward degrees through respective series of salutogenic, syntagmatic events and despite feelings of academic and social isolation. Their decision to study in the United States begins
with a family member who will enable them to study. Usually this family member is a male; however, a female family member can act as a proxy enabler, providing financial or emotional support. Having family who had studied or are currently studying in the United States further enables or inspires the women to cross the Atlantic for the United States. For women whose families are in the city in which they live or at the university in which they attend, the familial unit stands above other units of interaction. These strong family bonds are carried throughout the women’s pursuit of education and act as their primary support network.

Prior to the decision to study abroad, attending a public school and navigating the more rigorous curriculum prepares Saudi women for some of the rigor at a U. S. university. Attending university in Saudi for a period of time may introduce women to a type of higher education; however, the differences between Saudi and American university as far as student conduct, teacher-student relationships, and pedagogical approach are significant. Focusing on American culture, the English language, and critical thinking prior to coming to the United States acts as a pre-integration into the culture. After arrival but before beginning university study, attending an intensive English language program eases the women’s transition, introduces them to American higher education norms and mores, and allows them to make friends with their classmates in a relatively low-risk environment.

Outside of family and prior training, the impetus to study abroad comes from within women from Saudi Arabia or their husbands, who they see as part of their inner core. Early goal setting and insistence to achieve those goals engages them in the university even before they begin. Although they are not as committed to a specific
university or community, their commitments are strong within what degree they will seek. Degree choices are tied to future or current families and careers, and achieving higher education without a future family in mind also occurs. Women see themselves and their immediate support network as those who will help them achieve their goals.

The study found that to find someone at the university who wants them to succeed, the women seek help from advisors and key instructors at the university; some of whom become goal-setters for the women. Women from Saudi Arabia must adjust to more lenient teacher-student relationships, more rigid constructs of time and decorum for visiting professors in offices, higher expectations for critical and independent thought, and a high degree of classmate interactions. They feel isolated from their classmates because they do not talk to the women; many feel this has to do with their hijab or clothing options. In addition to their isolation from classmates, the women deal with instructors who may have negative attitudes about international students. Despite the challenges to overcome and the isolation to navigate, the women integrate academically through finding ways around the barriers to success.

Women from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States often have a core group of friends that consist of their family and other women from Saudi Arabia, this study found. This is often the woman’s choice, despite the ghettoization it creates. What might be an obstruction to making American friends is a lack of an outlet outside of class that brings both American and Saudi women together. Although some women indicate a desire to make American friends, knowing that the help and language they would provide would benefit their lives, most are satisfied with the circle of friends they created.
Friends, family members studying in the same city, children, husbands, keeping a home, and working were external commitments to which the women were committed while concurrently pursuing their degrees. The women manage success in all fields due to a high degree of hard work and effort, this study found. The effort they exert in their classes in order to overcome language and knowledge challenges prodigiously exceeds any other support system or goals they may have. Success, for Saudi women, is tied to the amount of time, mental exertion, and effort they put forth in their studies. With these efforts, women from Saudi Arabia successfully academically persist toward their degrees.

**Recommendations**

Because this study is grounded in the pragmatics of travel and study abroad, the theories of integration and persistence, and the realities of interacting with a system and its inhabitants, the recommendations that stem from this study must be trifurcated. The results of this study show that universities, instructors, and advisors could take specific steps to improve the academic and social integration of women from Saudi Arabia and all international students. Therefore, the recommendations are organized by what universities could do to improve the integration of international students and serve unique groups of students, what instructors and advisors can do to improve the chances for international student success, and what future researchers can do to further explore the integration and persistence of international students, specifically those from Saudi Arabia.

**Recommendations for Universities**

Given that the KASP has been extended through the five years following this
study and given that more women from Saudi Arabia are entering universities on a full- and part-time basis, universities should seek to serve their unique needs. As this research has suggested, women from Saudi Arabia persist despite challenges not because of the immense support they receive from universities and advisors. From the time they arrive on campus to the time they graduate, women from Saudi Arabia face academic and social isolation that ranges from what they chose to that which they must survive.

This study demonstrated the importance of intensive English language programs that are housed on a university campus. Universities with in-house or partnered IEPs should bolster those relationships, recognizing the importance of the academic and social foundation those programs lay for students. Universities without English language programs should seek partnerships with IEPs that could not only bring more international students to campus but also act as a soft landing for international students, reducing acculturative stress, allowing the students to make a home in their new country, and introducing them to American higher education culture.

Once the students matriculate to the university through an IEP or a standardized English entrance examination, universities should invest in extensive orientation practices for new international students that extends beyond the obligatory and often-used pre-term week. As was revealed in the research, students, not just women, from Saudi Arabia leave a world of rigid educational norms that include only formal interactions with instructors and administrators of the same gender, direct instruction that is memorization-based, and strict standards of decorum. Saudi students then enter the realm of American higher education that boasts professors who often times pride themselves on informality, regularly lionizes free and critical thought, and, as is
portrayed in various media, houses students who, upon leaving the confines of their parents’ control, take the opportunity to shed standards of decorum and adopt freedom and liberty in the form of parties, protests or activism, and new identities. Adjusting to these new academic and social systems takes more than a week. Additionally, if the university is large, welcoming hundreds of new international students each fall, the opportunity for individual needs being met declines. Including a first-semester course for international students that breaks them into smaller groups, introduces them to American and university culture, and eases them into their new social realm would be ideal.

These first-semester introduction to university classes, however, should not be limited to international students alone. Capping enrollment for international students at one half of the class limit and requiring domestic students to fill the other half would improve the academic situation for all involved. As was seen in the research, women from Saudi Arabia felt isolated, saying that their classmates did not speak to them. Whether it is the *hijab* on her head or the accent when he speaks, international students are ignored by their classmates, and, perhaps, the domestic students ignore each other, opting for interaction only with their previously-chosen social group. A course designed to introduce all students to the university—with its resources and individual set of norms—, critical thinking, and each other would go a long way toward pulling Saudi women out of their home environment and introducing American students to the benefits of meeting and interacting with students from various backgrounds.

In addition to doing more to bring American and international students together in the classroom, universities should provide information, training, and support for
instructors, professors, and staff on the various student groups that arrive to campus. The latter group, support staff, tends to be overlooked in trainings and professional development. Students on a college campus primarily interact with advisors and instructors; however, day-to-day interactions include food service employees, library staff, building service attendants, and other administrative assistance and office workers. These small, yet vital, interactions with staff fill in the blanks of a student’s experience on campus. Academic, administrative, and support staff training should include the basics of students’ home culture, including manners, mores, and norms. For example, knowing that a Gulf Arab woman might not shake men’s hands would go far to eliminate an awkward situation for both parties. Going further than simple greetings, training should also include insights on the country’s educational system, food limitations or customs, and societal standards. More specifically and, again, vital to the comfort of students, knowing restroom and cleansing practices of students from various religions and going so far as to provide them with some small comforts in restrooms would ease the anxiety and discomfort of many international students. For universities, simply being aware of students’ various cultural backgrounds makes welcoming and serving them a smoother, more intuitive process.

Outside of the classroom, universities could provide opportunities with housing and other amenities to bring Saudi women and other select groups to campus. All of the women in this study lived off-campus, preferring the privacy and home-like environment that an apartment provided as opposed to a dorm with a communal bathroom. Providing on-campus apartment-like living for women from Saudi Arabia and other students who have recognized cultural and personal needs for space would
bring more international students to campus without compromising those specific needs.

In addition to providing a variety of housing options for international students, the university could recognize that some situations cannot be overcome with integration. In other words, providing services for students that meet their singular needs, yet deviate from what is the norm on an American university campus, would bring more students to campus. For example, most universities have exercise facilities. Like most other parts of the campus, these facilities are open to both men and women, including any classes, open swim time, and exercise equipment. Because women from Saudi Arabia who choose to veil cannot shed their hijab in front of men, nor can they reveal skin that is not their hands and sometimes feet, most women who exercise must seek facilities in their communities that have either women-only rooms or serve only women. The university could offer closed classes for women or time in pools or workout rooms for women only in order for women from Saudi Arabia and other women who prefer to or can only workout with other women. Although this may seem to compromise the democratic nature of American universities, it is a small step toward integrating an otherwise isolated group.

Finally, universities could welcome international students by bringing their families into the fold of orientation, progress, and completion. As was seen in this research and in the researcher’s experience, an international student’s family is integrally involved in their child’s education. It is not uncommon for an international student’s family to, like American students, accompany them to university for the first week; however, this journey represents a larger leap for families from outside the United States. The cost, time, and effort to obtain visas, plane tickets, and leaves of absence
from work in order to make sure their children arrive safely represent a true investment for the parents of a new international student. In return, the university could do more to reach out and welcome parents to the campus. Although many universities already have parents’ sessions or even offices of parental support, they may not be providing unique support to international parents. Conducting an orientation for international parents that includes much of the same information provided to their children would bring them into the fold. As they are as much a part of their child’s success as the university, as was seen in this research, the more the parent knows about where their child lives, studies, and learns, the better the chances are for their success.

The steps a university can take to welcome international students to their campus and aid in their academic and social integration range from substantial to minute. For the most part, women from Saudi Arabia found ways to integrate from within themselves or worked around places they felt they could not penetrate. For the universities to begin to meet international students in the middle on some aspects and prepare themselves for the arrival of unique groups will be for universities to become truly internationalized.

**Recommendations for Instructors and Advisors**

For most students, experiencing university academics begins with advisors and is carried out through listening to and interacting with professors. These interactions can color a student’s experience for the semester or for their entire length of study at the university. Integral to students’ success is not only the classes they take but the order and combination in which they take them. Unfamiliar with the content, level of difficulty, and expectations of most classes, in addition to the freedom to choose classes,
international students rely on advisors and instructors *cum* advisors to steer them in the right direction. After the classes have been chosen, the reliance on the provider of knowledge continues. The onus to create a sound educational experience for international students lies significantly with the instructor. There are certain aspects advisors and instructors can consider when interacting with students from Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Arguably, a good advisor knows that the classes one must take to earn a degree is the tip of an iceberg that contains nuanced elements of success. Knowing or inquiring about a student’s unique situations and limitations can make for an enriched advising experience. For international students, the first level of knowledge is the pragmatic one: transportation. As was revealed in this research, transportation enabled and disabled study. Knowing that an advisee cannot take night classes after transit stops or cannot attend a class that requires travel to off-campus locations can inform advising. Further than base-level needs, advisors should be aware of the language and cultural limitations placed on a student. Assessing classes for their cultural weights and combining them with classes that do not require as much background knowledge would enable an advisor to design a semester with a student that is easier to navigate. For example, a sociology or folk studies elective—both laden with cultural contextual knowledge—could be paired with mathematics or science. Additionally, weighing the reading and writing load for each class and pairing rhetorically significant courses with more analytical classes might also aide in an international student’s adjustment and success. Finally, as was seen in this research, simply listening to a student’s needs, no matter what they may
be, would do much to avoid the student seeking a proxy advisor who may lead him or her away from the appropriate path.

The caveat of listening extends beyond advisors; instructors, too, can do well to listen to new international students. The women in this study showed agency in seeking professors in their offices; however, the reticence to ask and answer questions in class, to engage critically with the material, and to interact with peers overwhelmed the brief, one-on-one positive interactions with professors. Instructors should seek interactions with international students, engaging them in conversation that is candid and open. Showing students that they are at least aware of, if not sympathetic toward, their situations would let students know they are at least acknowledged.

Beyond listening and reacting to individual situations, instructors should be proactive in class, creating heterogeneous groups for collective projects, introducing students to each other, and challenging all students to leave their comfort zones. The classroom represents a microcosm for the students; as the leader, the instructor can create situations that present a minimal risk to students and result in a maximal learning environment. As was revealed in the research, women from Saudi Arabia adjust to situations when they are given overt opportunities to interact in a low-risk environment.

Beyond the social aspects of learning that come with a Western education, the critical and independent thought needed to succeed at a university in the United States represents a mountain range for women from Saudi Arabia to cross. Instructors, especially those who teach introduction and general education classes, can introduce basic and advanced critical thinking skills by modeling the behavior and requiring others to do the same. Additional to critical thinking assignments, instructors should be aware
of the unique challenges of all non-native speakers to produce essays and consume articles and other media at a moderate pace. This is not to suggest that instructors lower their standards or eliminate assignments; however, it is to suggest that instructors give benefit to all students by clearly outlining assignments and expectations as early as possible, encouraging the use of tutoring and other instructional support on campus, and being available to examine work completed ahead of time. Nothing in the results of this research suggested the students sought an easier experience; however, all were grateful when help or understanding was extended to them.

Like the university as a whole, instructors and advisors should seek to know the students with whom they interact. One of the purposes of higher education is an exchange of sorts, a giving and receiving of information, knowledge, assessments, evaluations, and opinions. For women from Saudi Arabia, the aforementioned statement is false. To come from a system of education as a one-way delivery of facts and enter a system that encourages checks and balances, critical challenging of ideas, and constant change is to accept a new paradigm. The micro-interactions of education, especially those with advisors and instructors, represent the gradual change and integration that all students experience at universities. This change, this leap, is greater for some than for others.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

This study focused on a subculture of a subculture embedded in the diverse, nuanced, yet unified culture of American higher education. With this group, there is more work to be done. In examining the lives and success of women from Saudi Arabia studying at institutions of higher education in the United States, research conducted on a
more longitudinal scale would encapsulate the greater journey of success. A case study of a woman prior to her arrival in the United States that continues through her successes and failures would embody the acute intricacies of this path. Related to that, a study of experiences of women from Saudi Arabia upon their return home could examine the impact of an American higher education experience on a woman’s life. Furthermore, a study much like the one presented here conducted at a university in a more urban or rural environment might yield respectively different narratives or results. The same study conducted in a different Western nation with a more mono-culture could explore how one unified culture interacts with another. Additionally, a similar study conducted with men from Saudi Arabia might show the dichotomous nature of the Saudi culture itself and how it interacts with American higher education culture.

Outside of the confines of qualitative study, research conducted with women or men from Saudi Arabia using quantitative methods might produce results that many feel are more generalizable. This research was an in-depth look at the lives of 11 women studying at one university. The wide scope of a quantitative lens could capture women studying at multiple universities in multiple areas of the United States. Additionally, a quantitative study that compares and contrasts the perceptions or experiences of men versus women from Saudi Arabia studying in the West would illuminate ways in which gendered experiences inform persistence and success.

This study focused on the stories of the students themselves; other research could focus on the experiences of international students through the eyes of instructors, advisors, support staff, and other students. These studies could be approached with a qualitative or quantitative methodology. Perceptions of international student success or
the impact of international students, especially those from Saudi Arabia can change the way Saudis feel during their experiences on campus.

This study could also be replicated with various other international student groups. It is integral to begin examining international students not as a monolithic group of students. A look at how students from China, India, or other countries persist at American universities would reveal important intricacies of integration, success, and persistence. As was shown here, international students may not neatly fit into models designed for traditional-aged American students, but their paths are at least parallel to their domestic counterparts. Showing how unique groups of students survive would inform ways in which to serve them.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to discover how women from Saudi Arabia successfully set goals, integrate socially and academically, and achieve success at an American university. It achieved this goal through the use of narrative analysis and an examination of salutogenic factors as they aligned with or deviated from a persistence model. While more attention is being drawn to students from Saudi Arabia who are filling university by virtue of the KASP, few studies separate a subgroup from the monolithic “international student” group. Studies that do focus on Saudi students show unique challenges and patterns; however, these studies tend to examine the male who are studying in the United States, as they represent the majority. The minority, or abject, position that women from Saudi Arabia represent creates even more unique challenges and obstacles that the women must overcome.

The women come from a cloistered world of *abayas* and veils, separate spheres
and spaces, and control. They enter a country that prides itself on equality and egalitarian practices, despite significant, conspicuous change that is still needed. As this study demonstrated, this separate past does not create inherent weakness that hinders their success in their new home. Although feminism may have a different meaning in Saudi, the women from there demonstrated independence, sought equality, fought to gain freedom and identity, and, in some ways, shed the cloaks of their past. The effects of these changes on the country that in many ways is behind the rest of the world in its treatment and approach to gender parity is yet to be seen. Many of the women indicated that the changes they had undergone would not be welcomed back home; however, as more women accompany their brothers or husbands, or travel as a solitary woman, to the States and return to their unchanged families, the impact may be inevitable.

The impact their presence has had on those Americans who learn their identities, observe their dedication to their families and success, and, in more than one way, look beyond their veils is immeasurable. From faceless women seen on the television, whose myths of demoralization and abjectness precede them, to independent, intelligent women, whose unique personalities go beyond the shapeless abaya—a garment meant to strip the onlooker’s mind of thoughts of the body underneath—the women with whom many students from the United States have the pleasure of knowing will perhaps shift our perspectives. To pursue a singular, seemingly unachievable goal is to pursue a course of manifest destiny, an American dream that resides in every citizen. It is this dream of success and higher education that shows us that we are not unalike; our differences in paths do not lead us to a different destination, even if our courses are wrought with unique challenges, efforts, and obstacles to overcome.
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APPENDIX A

INITIAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
1. Describe your life before coming to the United States. (*Pre-Entry Attributes*)

2. Describe your family. (*Pre-Entry Attributes ➔ Family Background*)

3. Describe your high school. (*Pre-Entry Attributes ➔ Prior Schooling*)

4. Describe yourself as a high school student. (*Pre-Entry Attributes ➔ Skills and Abilities*)

5. Tell me the story of how you came to the United States.

6. What were your goals before coming to the United States? How did they change? (*Goal Commitments ➔ Intentions*)

7. Describe your first impressions of the United States and of the institution.

8. Who or what at the institution seem(ed) invested in your success? (*Goal Commitments ➔ Institutional Commitments*)

9. What was/is different about attending a university or participating in education in the United States? (*Institutional Experiences ➔ Academic System*)

10. Describe your favorite class/professor. (*Institutional Experiences ➔ Academic System*)

11. Describe your least favorite class/professor. (*Institutional Experiences ➔ Academic System*)

12. Describe your study habits. (*Quality of Student Effort*)

13. Describe your friends at the institution. (*Institutional Experiences ➔ Social System*)

14. What clubs or organizations did/do you belong. Describe what you got/get from this engagement. (*Institutional Experience ➔ Social System*)

15. Why do you think that you completed your college degree while so many others do not? (*Persistence*)
Dear [Female from Saudi Arabia],

I hope this email finds you happy and well. My name is Dawn Winters, and I am an Ed.D. student at [this university]. I began the dissertation process this spring, and I love my topic: Women from Saudi Arabia and their success at American universities.

My background in English really made me interested in how our lives are stories. Working with international students has allowed me to get to know students and their stories well. The friendships I’ve gained with students from all backgrounds has taught me more than I can express. This research, I know, will teach me and those who read it even more.

The goal for this research is to collect the stories of women from Saudi Arabia who have traveled to the U.S. for study, which is why I am emailing you. Those who can succeed at a university show immense strength; those who can do it in another language and from another country are even stronger. I have known you academically through [the language programs], and I know your story is one that is important to hear.

I would like to interview you as a part of my study. Because you are a successful student who is a woman from Saudi Arabia, you have a great story to share.

Please call me or reply to this email if you are interested in speaking with me. Doing so would help me immensely and would allow your story to be featured. Also, please don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions about this research or the interview. My cell phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you,

Dawn
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Success and the Other[ed] Woman: Examining the Persistence of Female Students from Saudi Arabia
Investigator: Dawn Winters, Educational Leadership, 270-791-2507

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project:
This narrative inquiry will explore the academic persistence of female international students from Saudi Arabia who are currently and successfully progressing toward a bachelor’s degree from this institution or have successfully completed a bachelor’s degree from this institution. Data collection will be conducted via three face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with each participant, as well as an examination of each participant’s academic transcript.

2. Explanation of Procedures:
Each initial participant will be requested to cooperate with a one hour to 90 minute semi-structured interview will be scheduled at the participant’s home or an agreed-upon location.

After each initial interview, two things will occur: a time for the second interview will be scheduled and the participant will be asked if she would recommend another woman for the study. This latter question will be a part of the snowball sampling technique that is being utilized.

After the initial interview, a follow-up interview will be scheduled. This interview will be unstructured and reactive to the first. A subsequent third interview will be unstructured and act as a clarification for the previous two interviews.

If a suggestion of another participant is given, the contact and three-part interview process will begin again with each new participant.

3. Discomfort and Risks:
There are no known foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this project. None of the interview questions deal with sensitive or overly personal information. I will point participants to the contact information section of the informed consent form if they have any issues with the research.

WKU IRB# 15-347
Approval - 3/30/2015
End Date - 11/15/2015
Expedited
Original - 3/30/2015
4. Benefits:
The participants will receive no direct benefit from participation. The subject of the persistence of women from Saudi Arabia has yet to be explored to its fullest. The goal of this project is to record the experiences of women who have successfully pursued postsecondary education in the United States. If this goal is achieved, then others may learn from their experiences and explore the issues surrounding persistence and international students.

5. Confidentiality:
Only the primary investigator of this research project and a hired transcriber will have access to the research data. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement and will have no version of the data after the transcriptions are complete. Raw data, recordings, and the transcriptions will by the faculty advisor for a minimum of 3 years. Electronic versions of these files will be kept on a secure external hard drive that is protected by a password. The participants’ names and any identifiable information will be protected. Pseudonyms will be used to further protect the participants’ identities.

6. Refusal/Withdrawal:
Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date

Witness ___________________________ Date

- I agree to the audio/video recording of the research. (Initial here) __________
- I agree to release my academic transcript for this research. (Initial here) __________

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129

WKU IRB# 15-347
Approval - 3/30/2015
End Date - 11/15/2015
Expedited
Original - 3/30/2015
APPENDIX D
SYNTAGMATIC CHARTS